

Another Uninnocent, Elegant Fall

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Another Uninnocent, Elegant Fall

by [CatalpaWaltz](#)

Summary

"A relationship," says George, "is made of many small gestures."

Some of these gestures hang in Ben's closet. Others rest on his bookshelf. In his pocket. Around his wrist.

He hopes he's not reading too much into this.

(or, Ben becomes an accidental!sugar baby)

Notes

Part 1 of the now-sprawling Sugar Daddy modern!au that [Nimravidæ](#) spawned.

Rating will change as the story progresses.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

Ben comes back from a long day at school, his bag weighed down with quizzes to be graded and half-finished lesson plans. He shoulders through the door of his building, making a beeline for the stairs, and momentarily considers not checking his mail (all he wants is last night's leftover pizza and bed.) But he checks anyway.

There's some junk mail. A dated notice from his cable company. A magazine Caleb had subscribed him to for a laugh that makes Ben's ears go red thinking of the poor mailman who had to deliver it. And, just at the back of the mailbox, a small, square envelope, with a return address he does not recognize.

He's curious, so he opens the flap on the envelope before heading up.

What he finds inside is not what he would have expected. Stamped in gold foil on luxurious cream-white paper, he reads:

The honor of your presence is joyfully requested at the marriage celebration of

Margaret Francis Shippen

and

Benedict John Arnold

at St. Joseph's Church

April 8th, 2016

Ben stares blankly at the card in his hand, momentarily shocked into stillness. Of all the things he might have expected to happen today, this certainly wasn't one of them.

He takes a breath, rifles around in the envelope for the RSVP card tucked in the back. Pulling a pen from his pocket, he checks the box next to "Declines, will celebrate in spirit," with so much force he almost punches through the paper. He briefly considers, then rejects, the idea of scrawling something appreciative and apologetic in the margin, and drops it in the outgoing mail.

Thinking that will be the last of *that*, he goes up to his apartment (where his plans for the evening now include several beers in addition to the aforementioned pizza) and does his best to forget about it.

And he does a fairly admirable job, until one Saturday morning some weeks later. He's just put on his first pot of coffee, he gets a phone call.

Still bleary eyed, the echoes of his night out with Nate and Caleb throbbing in his temples, he doesn't look at the number on the screen before answering. Which is a mistake.

"...Hello?"

"Ben! Glad I caught you. How've you been?"

Ben freezes. *Hang up*, says a voice in the back of his mind (that sounds suspiciously like Caleb). *Just hang up. Do it now.*

"Ben? You with me?"

"Sorry, sorry, I'm -- hi, Benedict. I'm -- I'm great. It's -- " Ben casts around for something, *anything*, to say -- "great to hear from you," he finishes, grimacing.

"I'm sure," says the voice on the other line, and Ben can practically hear the practiced, self-assured grin that he makes as he says it. He's feeling nauseous, and he's not sure it's all from the hangover.

"Look, Ben, I'll be upfront with you, I'm calling because Pegs and I are finalizing the guest list for the wedding and I just couldn't believe it when she told me you weren't going to be able to come."

Flustered, panicking, so not yet awake enough for this conversation, Ben wings it.

"Oh, well, you know, I'd love to be there, I really would. But the week before spring break, things are always so busy with work, I really can't get away."

"Really?" says Arnold, "I thought you guys were off the week of the 8th?"

Ben flinches.

"I volunteered to stick around. Our principal's working on...it's nothing, just a special project the district has asked us to move forward with...and I need the overtime, you know how it is." It's pathetically-transparent, the kind of lie that he would never get away with even if he tried to pull it on a stranger, let alone someone who knows him as well as Arnold does.

"Hmm, well, if there's anything I can do to change your mind? We'd love to have you there. Pegs has just been dying to meet you."

Ben bites his tongue so hard he can taste blood.

"I hate to miss it, I really do," he says, so desperate to end this conversation that he actually feels a little short of breath. "Sorry, Benedict, I hate to cut this short, but I'm just about to head out the door, and--"

"Don't mention it," says Arnold, with that tone of generous warmth that Ben remembers so well. "We'll catch up another time. It was good talking with you, Benny."

"Same here," says Ben, through gritted teeth.

After that, he leaves the coffee in the pot, and just goes back to bed.

Two weeks later, Ben's just sat himself down at his desk. One more day, and he's got a whole week of emptiness to look forward to: nothing but getting up at 10 am, long, leisurely runs around his neighborhood, and the pile of DVDs on his coffee table just waiting to be watched. The anticipation alone is enough to make the tension start to melt from the muscles of his back and shoulders. He's just switching on his laptop and pulling up his lecture notes for the day when his phone rings.

This time, he's diligent about checking the number. Arnold had not tried to call again, but Ben had

been on the alert, forced to admit that he has no idea of what Arnold might do to get his way. The man had always been unpredictable, at least to him. But the number that flashes on his screen isn't one he recognizes.

"Hello?"

A woman's voice, high and refined, answers him.

"Ben! Oh good, I was so afraid I would get your voice mail. I just had a couple of questions."

Ben blinks.

"I'm so sorry, this is absolutely on me, but I don't think we've met? That is to say, I don't have this number..."

The voice breaks into a cascade of silvery giggles.

"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry. You know, Benedict's told me so much about you that I already feel as though we're friends."

Ben flinches.

"Margaret --"

"It's Peggy, please. Only my grandmother calls me Margaret."

"Peggy," he says, "I'm so sorry to be that guy, but I'm not sure why exactly --"

"Oh, there were just a few things missing from your RSVP that I wanted to clarify."

Ben opens his mouth to reply, but she just bowls him right over.

"You aren't bringing a plus one, right?"

"No, no, look -- I think there's been some kind of misunderstanding --"

"Are you driving yourself in? If not, we can arrange something with the hotel shuttle service. And I almost forgot, I'm forwarding your room information along, " -- Ben's laptop pinged an alert -- "let me know if there are any problems there. And you're not a vegetarian, Benedict was able to tell me that much, but any other dietary restrictions you should just send those along to our wedding planner, I just cc'd you " -- another ping -- "and don't worry about this all being so last minute. Considering the fact that we're paying --" (and here she drops a number that makes Ben go pale) "per person, they should be able to figure something out. Well, I have to run, you understand, so much to do. But it was lovely talking to you."

The line goes dead.

Ben stares down at the phone in his hand for a moment, dumbstruck. But then the bell is ringing and students are filing noisily into his classroom and he is forced to let the matter rest.

"You can't go," says Caleb, before taking a swig of his beer.

"He's right," pipes Nate, from Ben's other side.

"It's not -- it's not as though it's that big of a deal," says Ben, cradling his own glass, looking down at the scratched wood of the bar.

"Ben," says Nate, fixing his friend with a disbelieving stare, "you can't go. Lord only knows why he invited you in the first place, but it wasn't so he could do you a favor."

"He's right," says Caleb.

"If you had broken things off amicably it would be one thing," muses Nate, more carefully now. "But you've barely heard a word from him since it happened."

And Ben sees where they're coming from, he really does. But they do not understand Arnold the way that he does, or at least, has come to. They can't realize that if Arnold is looking to score some vague victory, he'll feel he's scoring even more points if he scares Ben away than if he convinces him to show up. Ben has to go, if only to prove to himself that he can be the bigger man, than he's unaffected.

But he tells Nate and Caleb none of this, just shrugs his acquiescence ("yeah, I guess you're right") and finishes his beer.

It's his own fault, of course. The poor waiter had been coming out of the kitchen, and Ben had turned the corner too quickly, without looking, and now there was half a tray of canapes down the front of his suit. As if this day couldn't get any worse.

He makes it into the bathroom without too many people giving him dirty looks. It's as insufferably posh as the rest of the venue the Shippens had rented out: the taps look like they've been gilded, there's stiff classical music trilling out of the hidden speakers. There's even a bathroom attendant, staring blankly up at him with towels in hand. Fan-fucking-tastic. He's just starting to assess the damage when a man walks from one of the urinals (which are probably carved from Italian marble) to the sinks. He washes his hands with a brisk, military efficiency, and then chances a glance at Ben.

"You're not likely to make much headway with that, I'm afraid. Caviar stains are almost impossible to get out."

Ben does not want to know how he knows that. God, all of the people in this place make him feel like the quiet, modest farm town where he was raised was on some other planet.

The man looks him over again, and Ben notes that he's got all the hallmarks of old-money, Dirk Squarejaw good looks: wealthy enough for the top-notch personal trainer and bespoke evening wear.

"I've got a few spare shirts in my car, if you'd like."

Ben glances fleetingly at the man's perfect barrel chest.

"Oh, I couldn't. And anyway, I don't think they'd fit me."

"Nonsense. A few safety pins should do the trick. And you can hardly go back out there looking like that. "

In truth, Ben had been hoping to use this as an excuse to turn tail and go sulk in his hotel room, but the ceremony hasn't even started yet and he knows it would be unbearably rude to leave now. So

he accepts. Ben buttons his jacket, and sees the man ("George, call me George") slip what looks like a crisp twenty to the attendant.

They go out to George's car, which is precisely the sort of car Ben would have thought a man like this would drive (sleek, white, a real thoroughbred of a vehicle) and he rifles around through some dry cleaning bags before he finds what he's looking for: a blue button-down that probably costs what Ben makes in a week.

When Ben realizes that he's expected to just strip right here in the parking lot he almost calls the whole thing quits, but it's too late to admit defeat now. As he's shrugging out of the caviar-stained ruin of his own shirt, he casts around for something to defuse the tension, asking:

"How do you know the happy couple?"

"Benedict and I are...former colleagues," he says, with a curiously cagey expression. "And what about you? Are you here for the bride or the groom?"

"The groom, same as you. We, uh, we met when I was at school in New Haven," says Ben.

They drop the subject.

He finishes buttoning up the borrowed shirt, and shifts his shoulders, getting used to the feel of so much extra space. He tucks in the tails, looks down at himself, and frowns. It's not as though the shirt is really that large on him, but he still feels curiously...swallowed up.

"Here," says George. He's got a safety pin in hand, another between his teeth. Expertly, he gathers some of the spare cloth at Ben's side. Ben is acutely aware of the warmth of his hands through the fabric, as he sets about putting Ben to rights. The backs of his knuckles brush over the hypersensitive skin of Ben's ribs, and he has to hold back a shudder (it's only because he's particularly ticklish there, he tells himself.)

When he's done, he steps back and encourages Ben to take a look at his reflection in the car's dark window. He actually looks almost convincing; not so put together as the rest of the jet set filling the hall, perhaps. But passable. When he pulls his jacket back on, George's modifications are entirely invisible.

"Much better, I think," says George. He's looking at Ben's reflected image, an odd expression on his face.

"It's -- yeah. Thank you. You're really good at this," says Ben, gesturing to where he employed the safety pins.

"Plenty of practice," says George nonchalantly. "Shall we?"

They return to the hall, where guests are beginning to file out towards the courtyard for the ceremony. He and George are separated in the bustle, but when Ben eventually settles in his seat (between two of Benedict's cousins, who are sullenly texting and have precisely no interest in engaging him in conversation) he can make out George's profile, from where he sits a few rows in front of him.

The service is long, and dull, and Benedict's vows go on for a solid ten minutes. So to pass the time Ben just...watches George. As an intellectual exercise. It's more pleasant, at least, than watching Peggy's mother and sister dab demurely at their eyes with lace-trimmed handkerchiefs, as if they were in some kind of Victorian period drama.

The man, he decides, is absolutely stone cold. Plenty of people appear more or less unmoved by the spectacle of true love or whatever it is that's taking place in front of them. Plenty more look like they're actively trying to *look* moved. But George is just...unreadable.

At dinner, Ben is seated with a gaggle of some of Peggy's old sorority friends who, though their conversation is quite engaging, set him seriously on edge with the open, hungry looks they send his way. He makes a point of showily drinking nothing but water all night (though, god, this would be so much easier to get through if he weren't sober) and waiting as patiently as he can for their plates to be cleared and the speeches to stop so he can make a proper break for it.

He has to stay put for the cutting of the cake (a white filigree and fondant monstrosity that's at least three feet tall) and the first dance, where Benedict twirls Peggy around in an overwrought, over-practiced sequence of spins and dips, but once the music kicks up properly and people begin to depart their seats for the dance floor, he sees his chance.

He finds George standing near the back wall of the hall, scrolling through something on his phone. When he sees Ben coming, he stops, pockets it, and gives him his undivided attention.

"Hey," says Ben. "I wanted to thank you for coming to my rescue back there. You really didn't have to do that."

Georges smiles indulgently.

"Don't mention it," he says.

"I wanted to make sure I knew how to get this back to you," says Ben, plucking at the shirt. "Do you have --" he freezes, realizing he was about to ask for his number in what could only read as the most blatant of come-ons, and backtracks, "...a work address I could maybe send this to? After I get it cleaned, of course."

George looks thoughtful. Ben wonders if he hasn't overstepped somehow, but before he can further qualify his question, George answers.

"How about this," he says, pulling a cocktail napkin off of a nearby table and a pen from his jacket pocket. "Give my office a call, we'll work something out." He scratches out a number -- New York city area code, professional extension -- and hands it over to Ben.

Ben takes the napkin, folds it up into careful quarters, and keeps it clutched in his hand until he's made it back to his car.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Ben goes to work. A shirt goes to the dry-cleaners. And two people go on their very first not-a-date.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ben returns to New Haven in a better mood than he had expected, though it's already in the early hours of the morning by the time he makes it back to his neighborhood. His memories of the wedding, or most of it, are perfectly neutral. Even the moment at dinner when Benedict had tipsily flung an arm around his shoulder, asked him how he was enjoying himself, and introduced him to the lucky bride,, barely registers as anything other than a moment's interruption between bites of his salmon. All in all, he can't help but be a little proud of himself.

When he returns to his apartment, he shrugs out of his jacket and starts the shower running. He looks at himself in the mirror, still in the borrowed blue shirt. In the harsh light of his bathroom, without his jacket on, he really does look a little silly with safety pins up and down his sides. But the color really isn't half-bad on him. Maybe he should look into getting one for himself?

Ben's never been fussy about his own clothes, but he takes the time to put the shirt on one of his good wooden hangers. He smooths out the wrinkles that have appeared in the shoulders and sleeves, carefully unfastens the safety pins one by one, and sets the hanger on the hook that hangs from the outside of the closet door. He just...stares at it for a beat, his head cocked to one side, not quite sure what he's thinking about.

But the moment passes, and he showers and slips into an old pair of flannel pajama bottoms and falls into bed.

If he has dreams of large, capable hands or of the sensation of silk-smooth cotton sliding over his skin, he does not remember them in the morning.

It's Friday afternoon, and Ben's last class of the day is just wrapping up. As the bell sounds, Ben raises his voices to catch his students' attention.

"All right, as a reminder, permission forms for Virginia are due next Wednesday, on my desk, by the end of the day. Don't let the reason you don't go on this trip be that you forgot to get a form signed, please."

One of the girls in the front row raises a hand.

"Mr. T, speech practice--" she prompts, and Ben continues.

"Thank you Lupe, yes, and Speech and Debate is on for 3:30 as usual. Our Duos teams are presenting, so don't miss it!"

The students file out in twos and threes, chattering amongst themselves, and Ben settles back in his chair, thoughtfully tidying up a few of the stacks of books and papers on his hopelessly-cluttered desk. He glances up at the clock. He should probably use this time to try and get a handle on the mess that is his classroom, but to tell the truth he's been distracted all day.

He'd taken the shirt to the cleaners on his way in that morning, and since then, he'd been plagued by the strangest irrational thoughts and fears. What if something happened to it, it got lost or mixed up with another order or ruined by some solvent that really shouldn't be used anymore? It was already inexplicable that he should have kept the thing for as long as he had: sitting on its hanger in his room for a full week before he finally brought it to be cleaned. Ben wasn't one to procrastinate when it came to such quotidian tasks, so why had he done so now?

Shaking himself out of this spiral of increasingly-illogical thought, he rummages around in his pockets for his phone. He'd already programmed in George's number. Before he can give himself time to talk himself out of it, he's making the call.

It's answered after one ring, by a bright, precise voice with a French accent.

"George Washington's office."

"Uh, hi. This is Ben Tallmadge," he says. "I was told to call this number? I borrowed a shirt from Mr Wash-- from *George* at an event the other day, and--"

"Ah yes yes, Mr. Tallmadge, he's been expecting your call, hold on one moment."

As the unnamed Frenchman transfers him, Ben worries at the sleeve of his sweater, suddenly preoccupied with worry at how this must look. God, the guy probably thinks they had one night stand, that Ben cooked up some pathetic excuse to call. But he's given only a moment to twist himself in knots over it.

"Ben, hello. I was worried you wouldn't call," says a familiar voice. He doesn't sound worried, in fact he sounds as though he's never been less surprised by anything than by the fact that Ben should choose to call him and that he should choose to do it in this exact moment. Ben laughs a little nervously.

"Yeah, I'm sorry I--"

"No need to apologize. It's good to hear from you."

His speaking voice, Ben notices, is oddly quiet and subdued for someone so physically imposing. It invites Ben to lean in, to focus on the words, to shut out the other sounds from the perpetually raucous environment of the school building.

"I don't mean to bother you," he continues, "but I wanted to see about getting you your shirt back."

"Ah yes, the shirt," says Washington. "I'd forgotten about it."

It strikes Ben as a little odd that he should have been thinking about Ben's call, and yet had apparently forgotten the only thing that gave Ben reason for calling.

"I'm happy to send it along. To your office maybe?" But Washington makes a low little hum of disagreement.

"How about this. Are you free tomorrow? Say, around seven?"

Before he's had a moment to think about, Ben says that he is.

"We'll get together and you can bring it by then. I'll have my EA forward you the address."

"Sounds great," says Ben, his throat a little dry. "I'll see you then."

"I'm looking forward to it," says Washington, and the line goes dead.

The next morning Ben wakes up far earlier than is his wont for a Saturday. He goes for a longer run than usual, inexplicably humming with nervous energy and itching to move. He's astonishingly productive: he cleans out the dirty dishes from his sink, does his laundry, actually vacuums for the first time in living memory. He chalks this sudden burst of industry up to the fact that the weather is unseasonably warm and pleasant: the first blush of a spring that won't really come for a few weeks yet, and he's trying to take advantage of his good mood.

When noon rolls around, he's standing in the middle of an uncharacteristically pristine apartment. His clothes are folded, his bed is made, his grading is finished. The thought of knocking about his place, doing nothing for the few hours he has before he needs to get himself on a train bound for the city, is unbearable, so he grabs his coat and his messenger bag and starts walking to the train station. He's three blocks from his apartment when he realizes he left the damn shirt in his room.

Thirty minutes later, dry cleaning bag actually in hand this time, he's waiting in the New Haven station, sun streaming in through the arched windows. He's early, trying to pass the time with the Joanne Freeman book he keeps meaning to finish.

On the bench across from him there's a woman on her phone, her young son in a stroller in front of her. The kid is fixing Ben with the most serious expression, his big dark eyes unblinking.

Ben slowly shifts his book up until it's hiding his whole face, then pulls it away with a flourish and a lopsided smile. The little boy beams at him. Ben does it again. The boy gives a little gurgle of childish laughter.

They've been at this game a few minutes when the announcement for Ben's train is called.

"Do you have any of your own?" asks the woman, as Ben rights himself and slips his book back into his messenger bag.

"No," he admits, "a few nieces and nephews, but that's it."

"Well you seem like a natural," she says warmly, and walks away with her son to grab a cup of coffee as Ben heads towards the platform.

He's in a sunny mood all the way into the city, watching the green-kissed scenery go by the window, the first spring flowers just beginning to bloom.

It's not yet three o'clock when he makes it to Penn station, so he passes the time just wandering, taking in all the places he used to go when he was still in the habit of visiting the city regularly. He

walks for a while on the High Line, watching all the young Brooklyn professionals go by with their babies and their dogs. He sits and reads in the park. He stares at his watch, astonished that time could be moving so slowly.

Seven o'clock rolls around at last, and he's walking in the direction where Google Maps points him, towards the address Washington's assistant had sent to him. He's not sure what he's expecting, but what he is not expecting is...a bar. What looks like a rather nice bar, with a decidedly old-school, restrained elegance: no pun in the name, no trendy Edison bulbs hanging in the window. There is a valet in a navy blue jacket, and Wall Street types smoking nervously by the front door.

Ben's suddenly very conscious of the fact that he's in jeans and an old flannel button-down. But he straightens his posture, hefts his bag and the shirt on its wire hanger. Maybe they'll let him in if he lets them think he's just someone's assistant, delivering their dry cleaning. After all, that is surely what Washington had planned: he'll get in, exchange some pleasantries, give back the shirt and go home.

The hostess looks altogether alarmed by his appearance, and perfectly ready to toss him out on his ass, at least until he tells her who he's here to see. Then her face goes almost suspiciously soft, a small, painfully-artificial smile pulling her mouth into an uncomfortable curve. She offers to take his windbreaker and the dry cleaning bag and points him in the direction of the bar.

Washington is already there, seated on a stool with a glass in front of him. Despite the fact that the bar is packed solid, no one makes any attempt to commandeer the stool next to him. He doesn't have his phone out, which fact Ben only takes note of because, personally, he can't stand to be seen waiting somewhere by himself without at least giving the impression that he's busily engaged in some kind of activity or conversation. Washington's gaze is just fixed at a spot on the opposite wall, and Ben gets the impression that his thoughts are very far away.

He walks over, and their eyes meet in the mirrored backslash behind the bar. Ben completely forgets what he was about to say.

"Glad you could make it," says Washington, gesturing to the seat beside him. Ben takes it before he can remember that this is only supposed to be a pitstop, that he doesn't want to be sitting here when whoever Washington was *actually* saving this seat for turns up to claim it.

"Did you find the place alright?" Washington asks.

"Yeah," says Ben, "it was fine. I had loads of time, even if Google had tried to lead me wrong."

Washington looks quizzical, so Ben elaborates.

"I took an early train, just kind of knocked around town for a while."

When Washington's of mild confusion expression doesn't subside, Ben realizes that he'd never actually corrected him on his probable assumption that Ben lived in the city, that when he said he'd gone to school in New Haven he never admitted to the truth that, in fact, he'd never left. It's not an assumption he can fault Washington for. After all, there weren't so many Yale grads so short on ambition that they couldn't stir themselves from the same apartment they had lived in senior year, to work a job that had begun as an unpaid internship haphazardly seized-upon and never cast off.

"An early train from --"

"Connecticut," he admits. Washington's eyes go just a little wide, his brows lifting a fraction of an inch, but his expression is otherwise unchanged by this recognition.

"You'll have to excuse me," he says, "I did not realize I was asking you to come so far."

Ben shrugs.

"It's nothing. I -- I haven't had the chance to visit the city for a while. It made for a nice change."

Washington takes a sip from his drink: bourbon, Ben feels safe in assuming, with just one ice cube floating in it and a glass of coke on the side. It's nearly empty, just a few mouthfuls left in the glass, and Ben finds himself wondering just how long Washington had been waiting here before he showed.

The bartender approaches them, asks Ben what he'll be having. Ben chances a glass at the staggering array of taps arrayed over the bar, and is momentarily caught off-balance until Washington gently suggests the house IPA. Ben thinks that a little bracing bitterness might be what he needs right now, and, somehow, it's pleasant to be able to follow his recommendation.

"So what is it that you do, in Connecticut? If you don't mind me asking," prompts Washington, once Ben has his own glass in front of him.

"I teach. High school history." This seems to interest Washington very much, for Ben is soon swimming in a sea of his questions: what he likes and dislikes about his subject, what he likes and dislikes about his students, what he thinks about the state of the administration and the district and what changes he would make. And before Ben can come up with a way to deflect the attention from himself and politely return Washington's interest in his own work, he finds himself swept up in it: telling stories of the students in his Credit Recovery period who have made him laugh harder than he ever has, or original orations composed by the kids he coaches in Speech that have moved him to tears. And Washington listens to everything with a steady, unwavering attention, his eyes never leaving Ben's face. He's amused and indignant and sympathetic at all the right moments, always inviting Ben to delve further into the topics that make him the most earnest and animated.

"The ones who take the big exam in May, how on earth do you keep them from running amok during the rest of the school year?" he asks.

"It's mostly a losing battle," Ben admits, "but we are taking a few classes down to Colonial Williamsburg in a few weeks, once they've all taken the test."

"Is that so?" Washington says, smiling

"Hm. It was that or Boston, and I think the kids relished the idea of going somewhere farther from home. We even let them vote on it. It was a very democratic process."

"You know, I actually worked there for a few summers," says Washington after a few moments, a look of fond reminiscence on his face.

"You did not," Ben nearly gasps.

"You know, it wasn't half bad. I already knew how to ride a horse, so that worked in my favor. It was easier than waiting tables or caddying. And it was a chance to -- well, to live somewhere different for a while."

Ben doesn't miss the shadow that passes over Washington's face at this, but he knows better than to ask.

"What was your -- your character?" he asks (and he isn't sure why, but it feels like an oddly intimate question.)

"Oh, I didn't have one, not really. I was a Wilderness Surveyor." And here he sits up a little higher in his seat, putting a little 18th-century pomposity into his voice and his manner. Ben can practically hear the capitalized letters. The line of his jaw actually looks stronger, somehow. It's mystifying.

"And what did that entail?" he asks, genuinely interested in the answer even as he mostly just wants to keep George smiling like that, lost in pleasant memories.

"Nothing much. Lots of looking through instruments, pretending to write things down. People would ask me questions, I explained what I was doing, how the equipment worked. I didn't get a lot of attention.."

Ben's trying to imagine dignified, tailor-trim George schlepping it through a sunny Virginia field with a pack of surveying equipment on his back and a tri-corner hat on his head. He has to hold up his hand to hide the wide, half-wild grin that breaks over his face. His effort to maintain his self-possession isn't helped by the fact that he's working on his third beer, and starting to feel it.

George is still, as ever, watching him closely, even piercingly. Ben had been able to consider it nothing more than polite interest before now, but he feels like he's going to start squirming under the scrutiny. Looking down, he chances a glance at the face of George's watch, gleaming in the low light. They've been here for hours.

Ben's stomach gives a little lurch. This hadn't been the plan. This had not been what he was counting on. And he's ready to panic, to bolt, but when George asks him if he's hungry, he says yes.

It's late when he makes it home, embarrassingly late. Their conversation had so meandered that Ben had nearly missed the last train north, only just managing to sprint onto the platform moments before it pulled away.

He's just about to fall into bed when he sees that there's a new voicemail on his cell. It's the stiff-faced hostess from the bar, just calling, she says, to inform him that he'd left his dry cleaning in their coatroom. Ben could scream.

Chapter End Notes

I love the idea of Lafayette as GWash's Girl Friday okay?

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

In which there are tricorne hats, cheesy souvenirs, invitations extended, and invitations misunderstood.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ben ducks through the open door, shepherding a gaggle of students ahead of him into the blessedly cool, shady recesses of the gift shop.

His kids are already milling about, fanning themselves with informational brochures and making half-hearted attempts to steal each others' tricorne hats, which some of them had purchased on a whim that morning. But the heat has sapped most of their boisterous energy and their capacity for mayhem, and while some were rather grouchy as a result, they had proven far easier to manage than they might otherwise have been.

Ben drags a hand through his sweat-sticky hair, taking in grateful breaths of air-conditioned oxygen (in Ben's mind, a perfectly acceptable anachronism.) He makes sure his students aren't likely to cause too much trouble, and then he lets himself slip into the still sanctuary of his own thoughts.

It's not as though he hasn't been enjoying himself since they got to Williamsburg. He has, it's only that he's been...distracted.

He'd woken up that morning to two voicemails: one from Anna, checking in to see if they were still on for their regular dinner date on Friday, and one from George.

Hello, Ben. I hope I'm not disturbing you. I just wanted to check in, I hope your trip is going well. I thought I would run an idea by you. There's an exhibit opening at the Library that I thought you might appreciate: 'Cryptography Through The Ages', I think it's called, or something like that, and I thought we might go. Does Saturday work for you? Let me know.

There's nothing very remarkable in it, Ben knows: just a friendly invitation from someone who'd been kind enough to pay attention to Ben's interests, the last time they'd had the chance to speak. But he'd shot back a hasty text before breakfast, telling George that it sounded like a great idea, he'd love to go, and asking where/when should they meet. In retrospect, he almost wishes he had called, as George had been so courteous to do, but that had seemed such a daunting prospect. And George hadn't seemed to mind, texting back a few minutes later with a time, a place, and the name of a restaurant where he thought they might grab a bite afterward.

Ben had typed out a "sounds great, looking forward to it," and that honestly should have been the end of it. But he keeps finding himself checking his phone at odd intervals, buzzing with a sense of *expectation* that honestly makes no sense. This was no different than making plans with Anna to take in a movie, or going out with Caleb or Nate. George had certainly given him no reason to think....

But that's a dangerous train of thought, one which Ben really shouldn't indulge here and now (if he's to do it at all, which he *knows* he shouldn't) and so he yanks his mind back to the present.

Looking around the store, he's honestly a little disappointed by the lack of kitschy, touristy merchandise, if only because it means that it will be harder for his kids to afford suitable souvenirs. Most of the stuff on offer is decidedly outside Ben's own means, let alone theirs, so he probably shouldn't be wasting much time on this detour, no matter how distracted he might be by his own thoughts.

But he lets the kids have a breather before they have to venture back out into the harsh May sun, and he gives himself time to wonder if it would be at all untoward to get George something, just a memento from a place that he seemed to have once known and loved so well. He doesn't strike Ben as the sort of person to hang on to his memories that way.

But almost everything in the shop feels like too much; all of it exuding a weird folksy vibe that Ben is doubtful George would appreciate.

Then he finds the perfect thing.

Sitting alone on a shelf he sees a little snow globe, featuring a tiny version of the Governor's Palace. Ben gives it a shake, and instead of snowflakes, tiny red-white-and-blue fireworks rain down around it. It's ridiculous, and cheesy, and perfect.

"Ooh, who's that for Mr. T?" ask his students, as he walks away from the register with the object in hand.

"It's for me," says Ben stubbornly, to a chorus of (entirely anticipated) sniggers, and sighs of "Mr. T, you're so *weird* " and assorted variations thereof.

"I bet it's for his *girlfriend* ," says one boy in a stage whisper.

"No way. No one would be stupid enough to give that to their girlfriend," says another.

"And besides, you know Mr. T ain't got no girl."

"True, true."

Ben chuckles to himself, and tucks his purchase into his messenger bag.

Friday night, Anna is sitting at his kitchen table, a glass of wine in hand. They've done this for a year or so: she likes to check in with him, maybe once or twice a month, and it's honestly a comfort to have her here, eyeing him warily as he cooks her dinner and she talks about how things are going at work. It makes him feel...somehow more grown up, more connected. It also gives him a reason to clean his apartment, which is hardly trivial.

"Selah's family invited us out to Montauk for the weekend," she says, as he scoops portions of pasta into a serving bowl. "You'd be welcome to join us, if you'd like."

"I'm actually headed into the city on Saturday," says Ben, without looking at her.

"Oh," she says, doing her best not to sound too surprised. "What for?"

"There's a thing at the library. It's not -- honestly I doubt anyone but me could even be interested in

it, but I wanted to catch it while I'm not too busy."

"Ben," she begins, setting down her glass, "tell me you aren't going to be spending a Saturday at the *library*, by *yourself*."

"I'm not -- I won't be. By myself," says Ben, and god, he has absolutely no reason to be blushing, but he is.

"And who did you manage to rope into sharing the duller weekend of all time with you?" she says, half-laughing, eyes bright with mischief.

"Just a friend. It was his idea, actually. The library."

"A work friend?"

"No -- we met at a wedding."

Anna's eyes narrow to slits.

" *Benedict's* wedding?"

Ben winces.

" *Shit* Ben, Caleb said you weren't going! God, that he even had the nerve to *ask* you --"

"Okay, alright," Ben interrupts, his voice a little too loud for the room. "It was actually fine." At her doubly-suspicious look, he presses on.

"It was! We barely even spoke to each other, and it didn't bother me at all. Honestly, I'm glad I went." It hits Ben a little hard to realize that he isn't lying, not even a little. He *is* glad he went, considering what he got for his trouble.

Anna sighs.

"You know we're just trying to look out for you, right?"

"I know, and I appreciate it. I really do. But there's really no need. It's -- it's fine now," he finishes, rather lamely.

Anna looks at him for a long moment, before she heaves out a resigned sigh and takes a long swallow of wine.

"So, this friend," she asks, "what's he like?"

This time, Ben does his research, and when he sees that the restaurant George has picked out is rather above his usual habit, he selects one of his nicer oxfords to wear (a blue one, which he chooses only because he remembers George saying how well the color suited him.)

He tries to read on the train, but he keeps getting distracted by persistent, inexplicable nerves. He chalks it up to all the work he has to do before the school year ends, even though he'd left his desk clear when he'd gone home Friday afternoon: his grading done, his lesson plans prepared.

He walks from the station to meet George at the doors of the library.

"Hi," he says, not quite sure how to begin this conversation he's thought so much about, in spite of himself.

"Hello," says George, the barest hint of a smile tugging at his mouth. "No trouble on the train?"

Ben laughs, a little nervously.

"There never is. But it's nice of you to ask."

They stand like that for a little while, Ben struggling to come up with something, *anything* to say, but it's only then that he notices that the doors to the library are shut fast, the lights off. He glances at the hours printed on the placard placed beside the entrance.

"Oh, shoot, I didn't realize -- are they closed? We probably should have --"

But George waves a hand, cuts him off.

"I called in a favor. Hold on just a moment."

It's only a few seconds before a harried-looking librarian comes to the door. He glances furtively around, unlocks the deadbolt as though he's afraid of getting caught on camera.

"We won't be long," says George, by way of assurance. The librarian mutters something unintelligible, and to Ben's ears, vaguely threatening. But they're let into the exhibition hall, and the door closes behind them. And Ben is just...swept away.

It is, as George had said, something Ben very much appreciates. When the doors open, and the lights come on, Ben actually gasps aloud at the sight.

George patiently follows him from exhibit to exhibit as he *oohs* and *ahs* over the incredible array of code dictionaries, decryption set-ups, and ciphered correspondence -- the kinds of sources he'd swooned over as a student writing his thesis on diplomatic encryption methods, and for which he still has an unmitigated affection. He'd never imagined he would be permitted to examine so many of them up close and in person, and without the press of the madding crowd.

"Ooh, see this one?" he says, pointing to an open tome behind glass that honestly looks no different from the hundred other nondescript books on display. "It's the Copiale cipher, it wasn't actually decrypted until 2011, can you believe it?" George nods and says he can't, even as Ben is moving onto the next thing, and the next, never noticing the way his eyes track the flash and flourish of Ben's gestures, and pay precisely no attention to the scores of dry, dusty manuscripts and rusted code grilles guarded behind glass.

He's still talking about it when they leave, more than an hour later. George asks him the occasional question, but honestly he's just content to let Ben talk, rambling on about the historical ramifications of this or that document until they make it the handful of blocks to the restaurant.

It's a bit of a shock to Ben, to see the place. There's nothing to explicitly advertise it, but Ben knows this is the kind of establishment where he would never, ever dare to come himself, or even bring a date to. There's something about the crisp folds of the white tablecloths, the bearing of the waiters, the cast of the lighting, that just screams of near-unlimited wealth, of the kinds of fortunes that aren't even aware of themselves, but merely secure in their bottomless capacity.

They're seated at a spot next to the window, and before Ben's even got a handle on the three different menus in front of him, George has already ordered a bottle of wine and put in some kind of request to the chef and Ben would be lying if he said his head isn't spinning, just a little.

He opens up the first menu, what he hopes is the one with actual food in it (he'd forgotten lunch, and also possibly breakfast, his stomach churning both with hunger and with some feeling that he could not identify), and he's greeted with something almost entirely unfamiliar.

There are no prices next to the dishes. Half of the words are in languages Ben does not know. The light in the room is so dim that he can hardly make out the words on the page. And he's absolutely, one hundred percent, in over his head.

Something of his distress must show on his face, because George reaches out a hand, pushes the menu down from Ben's line of sight.

"How about I just take care of it?" he says, and something deep, deep in Ben's brain just kind of...clicks into place. *Let me take care of it. Let me take care of you.* He feels like he's short-circuiting.

"Yeah. Sure, okay."

George smiles.

Their waiter returns in very short order, making all kinds of unintelligible small talk as he pours them their wine. George takes a sip, dispensing, Ben notices, with any pretense of swirling the glass or swishing the mouthful around or any of the other obnoxious shit that Ben associates with high-class wine drinking. He tries it, it's good, they move on.

George orders for him, and either this is a common occurrence at this particular establishment or their server is just flawlessly trained, as he doesn't bat an eyelash. Ben isn't even sure what he's getting, so many of the words involved are just apparently untranslatable, but he trusts George. Certainly enough to do this one thing.

Then they're alone. The sounds around them, both inside the restaurant and out on the street, seem somehow muted, far away. There's a warm, pleasant buzzing at the back of Ben's awareness that he's sure couldn't have been caused by the two sips of wine he's taken.

George settles further into his chair, looks at Ben from across the table.

"So, the trip went well?"

Ben pauses, his glass of water halfway to his lips.

"It did. Better than I expected, honestly," he says with a laugh. "I think joining in with some reenacted angry mobs really helped the kids get out some of their excess energy."

George chuckles.

"Yes, that was always a popular gimmick with visitors."

"That actually reminds me," says Ben, going to his bag, "I got you something. Partly as an apology for, well, for the shirt --"

George waves him off.

"Please, don't worry about it. It clearly prefers you over me, at any rate."

Ben blushes.

"Well, it's for that. And just, something for you to remember the place by. Since you seemed to

like it so much."

He pulls the gift bag out, puts the snow globe on the table, and, god, but it feels such a stupid and inadequate thing now that he's actually looking at it. The slightly-scuffed plastic of the dome looks dull and cheap in the soft, refined light of the restaurant, entirely out of place in the middle of all this sophistication. What was he thinking? He's actually wondering if there isn't some way to backtrack, pretend like he's joking, to *fix this*. But then George picks the thing up, and gives it a shake.

Ben's cheeks are burning. He's just waiting for George to say something withering and dismissive, or worse, to feign gratitude for such a stupid present. What he does not expect is the wide, bemused smile that breaks over his face.

"I love it."

"It plays music too," mutters Ben. "There's a little switch, at the bottom."

George hums his acknowledgment, still staring at the miniature scene.

"Well, maybe we won't test that out here," he says thoughtfully. "It might draw a little too much attention. Thank you, Ben."

Ben is sure that they have to be drawing some attention already, but he says nothing.

"So," Ben begins, "I feel like we've talked way too much about me. And besides the fact that you spent a summer in knee-breeches and a silly hat, I don't know that much about you."

George takes a thoughtful sip of wine before he answers.

"There isn't much to tell. My work consumes a significant portion of my time, but I won't pretend that it's particularly interesting, or certainly as meaningful as what you do. It doesn't leave me much space for more...pleasant activities. But I like to get out of the city when I can, to the mountains in particular. I find it clears my head."

Ben nods. He'd googled the other man (and had felt a little guilty doing it), but his cursory investigations hadn't revealed anything that might have been considered compromising. He'd learned that he had come into a fairly modest inheritance at the death of his brother, and that he'd built from that inheritance an impressive array of business interests: infrastructure investment, land acquisition, agricultural research, all things that Ben really couldn't even begin to understand. But the fact that George was involved with them was enough, somehow, to make him interested. Still, he wasn't sure how to ask for more information without seeming nosy or intrusive. So he lets the subject drop, for now.

Their food comes, far more quickly than Ben would have thought possible, and for a little while he's largely distracted by the task of identifying what's on his plate and figuring out how to eat it.

He's given a gift, though, when a question he asks about some mysterious grain-type-thing on his plate prompts George to actually lapse into a little tangent about a project he seems quite excited about: a biofortified variant of sorghum that's being cooked up in one of Mt. Vernon Corp.'s laboratories.

"It's going to have the potential to curb Vitamin A and iron deficiencies, or so they tell me. I've been doing my best to understand the science, and our geneticists have been very gracious in letting me come in and bounce around the lab, but I leave that work to people who are smarter than I am. But we have several community partners, and..."

Ben finds himself overflowing with questions, and he manages to keep George talking through another two courses, just taking in the way he gesticulates excitedly with his fork as Ben coaxes him into elaborating on other ventures that have him similarly excited, and soon it's difficult for Ben to believe what George had said about his work being neither interesting or meaningful.

By the time they gather themselves to go, the restaurant is practically empty. Ben doesn't even notice the way the maitre d' eyes them on the way out, he's too distracted by the way George gently sets a hand on his lower back to keep him from getting swept up in the evening crowd on the sidewalk. He swallows thickly. They'd finished the one bottle of wine, and Ben isn't sure whether to be grateful or regret the fact that they had declined to order another. He knows himself well enough to be sure that he can't possibly be drunk, but the thrumming tension in his limbs feels like an entirely different kind of insobriety. He really, really needs to go home before he does something embarrassing.

"Well," says Ben, "I should call myself a cab, I guess."

George looks at him, the slightest furrow between his brows, considering.

"It's quite late, are you sure you want to go all the way back to Connecticut?"

Ben shrugs. What else is he going to do?

"It's not so bad, I swear, I'm used to it."

George stops, and the tangle of pedestrians sharing the sidewalk with them part like water around rock. His hand is still hovering, centimeters, from Ben's back.

"I meant," says George, quietly enough that Ben feels like he needs to lean in closer to hear him, "that you could go back in the morning, if you'd like. I have...plenty of space."

Ben's heart is thumping in his chest. He knows George is only being polite, only means that Ben is welcome to his guest room or his couch; no other explanation holds water. But his brain has already vaulted Ben's thoughts somewhere entirely different, bombarding him with imagined scenes entirely inappropriate, and he knows he cannot say yes to this.

"Thanks, but I -- I should really be getting back. Thank you so much for dinner."

George withdraws at once, retreating two paces with remarkable speed, and Ben hadn't even realized how close they had been standing until they move apart.

He lets George hail him a cab (it helps, he insists, to have at least an inch over everyone else in the street) and he begins the journey home. It seems longer than it ever has.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Ben's students call him "Mr. T"

And yes, they're too young to know why it's funny.

I swear there's a good reason (or a few good reasons) for Ben's prolonged Denial Spiral. All will be explained in time!

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Summer in the city. George settles on a strategy. Ben reads a lot of books.

Chapter Notes

Apologies in advance for this chapter. It was a struggle to get through. But I already have half of #5 written and it should be up by the end of the day on Monday (feel free to come into my inbox on Tumblr and hold me to that!)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Chapter 4

George watches Ben's cab pull away, not wrenching his gaze until it turns a corner and goes of sight. He considers calling another for himself, hesitates, and decides that, no, it would be better for him to walk home. He needs time to collect his thoughts.

Sighing, he turns left instead of right, moving towards the park instead of towards the river and home. It's probably too late to be out, even for someone like him who would only ever be approached by the most deranged of muggers, but he is not in much of a mood to care. He has to determine a course of action. And he doesn't particularly wish to go home.

He will not deny that he is disappointed. He will not deny that he's more than a little confused. It had been a long time since he had misread someone so thoroughly. Normally, on the very rare occasions that he makes a faulty judgement call in one of these situations, he would make a proper retreat: cut off contact if that was feasible, or just ruthlessly ignore any residual tension if it was not. But underneath the currents of his present frustration, sits a feeling that's solid, durable, and altogether new: attachment. He doesn't *want* to pull away. He doesn't want to be cut out.

Still deep in thought, George continues his detour into the park. The settling of summer means that even at this late hour there's an uncomfortable stickiness hanging in the air that reminds him inexorably of home, of heavy swampy heat. He used to do this a lot then too: wander in the summer dark because he didn't wish to go home. Years he's lived in New York, and he still isn't sure whether he hates the desolation of the city in winter or the sweltering concrete oven it becomes in summer more. Skirting the lake, he dives back into the mire of his of thoughts.

He can appreciate that Ben had made his lack of... interest clear. And it was of course the boy's prerogative to change his mind, if that was what he wanted. But this had, from the very beginning, been a marked deviation from his usual pattern. Just the fact that he has already persisted so long is enough to lend it novelty. It had never taken two meetings, let alone three, for both parties to come to an understanding and an arrangement. In this case, for the first time, he's willing to make an exception. In this case he's willing to work with what he has.

He has enjoyed the young man's company, his conversation. He finds Ben at once surprisingly

wise about some things and endearingly innocent about others. He finds his perspective illuminating, his opinions well-informed and carefully considered, and his great distance from the world George usually inhabits incredibly refreshing. He's not met many people that he felt he could take at their word, who did not conduct themselves with some simmering ulterior purpose. But he senses none of this in Ben. And the fact of the matter is that he does not have so many friends that he can afford to cast one off, for the sole reason that they proved unenthusiastic at the prospect of sleeping with him. So he is not averse to the prospect of finding a source of companionship in Ben, and, if Ben permits him, of seeing to it that he wants for nothing.

So he has his plan, to test the waters, to see if a clarified, simplified friendship might be acceptable to him. In the end he returns home in reasonably good spirits, considering the fact that he had not expected to have to return home alone. Comforted by his determination on a course of action, he goes to bed, and does not dream.

Three days later, and the blazing heat that had plagued Ben and his students in Virginia seems to have followed them home, like a lost puppy trotting distantly but doggedly at their heels. When Ben makes it back to his place at the end of the day, he's thoroughly miserable; his shirt sticking to his back, the strap of his messenger bag digging painfully into the meat of his shoulder, weighed down by the stacks of end-of-year assignments he has put off grading.

He has not quite been his usual self at work. He's caught himself snapping at some of his students for things that he has long since come to expect as the normal expressions of year-end excitement. He's been unusually taciturn with his co-workers, preferring to eat his lunch at his desk rather than deal with their pestering questions about what his plans are for the summer, with the diminished workload. There's an unanswered text from Nate on his phone, asking him if he wants to go out Friday that he isn't sure how he wants to reply to, and a voicemail from Anna that he has yet to return.

He thrusts the key into the deadbolt with unusual ferocity, pushing his way heedlessly inside until suddenly he's stopped short and tugged backward, the strap of his bag having gotten caught on the handle of the door. He hears the sound of stitches tearing, and lunges awkwardly to catch the thing before all his student's final projects tumble onto the dusty floor of the lobby.

"Fucking *shit*," he mutters, gathering the bag up under one arm. He stares at the busted strap for a moment, wondering if he knows some way to fix it, but nothing comes mind.

Still fuming, furious with himself, he nearly misses the package waiting for him under the row of mailboxes as he storms towards the elevator. He considers, for one frustrated moment, just coming back for it later, after he's had time to cool down. But his better sense overcomes his grouchiness and he takes it with him.

Before he opens it, he heaves his now-ruined bag onto the kitchen table, then goes into the bathroom and splashes cold water on his face until he feels a little less of a mess. Then he investigates the box. He can't really remember a time he received a package that wasn't just something he had ordered for himself on Amazon, and this did very clearly did *not* come from Amazon. He cuts through the cardboard to reveal a white, ribbon-wrapped gift box. And inside...a new messenger bag.

He pulls it from its tissue-paper wrapping, takes a moment to admire it. It's obviously nicer than his (now-ruined) own, but it's not so clearly expensive that he's likely to draw much attention to himself when he brings it to school. In fact, it's precisely the sort of thing that he would buy for himself, if he was able. The warm, slightly-distressed brown leather is supple under his hands. It

looks like it could last him decades. Tacked to the gift receipt, he finds a handwritten note.

Ben,

I hope you don't mind, but I noticed your bag was on its last legs and I didn't think you should have to go without, if it should happen to break on you.

Please consider this an effort to partially clear the air of any misunderstandings from Saturday night. I certainly did not mean to make you at all uncomfortable, and I apologize if I did so. I look forward to hearing about how your year closes out, and would be glad of the opportunity to spend some more time with you this summer.

-GW

Ben blinks down at the card. He hadn't realized his leaving so abruptly would have struck George like that: Ben knew he was only being friendly, only trying to look out for him. But in retrospect, he can see how his hasty exit might have left things confused.

There's more to it than he's seeing, he's sure, but he can't parse it out and honestly right now he doesn't want to. He just wanted to live in this moment, in his rescued mood, the diffuse, non-specific warmth that filters through him at having the reassurance of George's friendship in his hand.

He takes the bag into his room, hangs it on the hook on his door, and just looks at it for a little while. He probably ought to at least make a show of refusing it, but he knows it would be futile. The trajectory of that conversation plays itself out so easily in his mind, and without deepening the trace lines of awkwardness that have begun to inscribe themselves through their budding friendship Ben knows it's not a battle he can win. All he would end up doing is wasting George's time and his own, which is something he very much doubts the other man would appreciate. And besides, he was going to have to get himself a new bag anyway.

It doesn't seem appropriate to thank him in a text, but George doesn't pick up his phone when Ben calls, so he leaves a message.

"Hey, It's Ben. I just wanted to say thank you so much for the bag. Your timing honestly couldn't be better. Our last day of school is this Friday. Would you maybe want to get together sometime over the weekend? Let me know. And thanks again."

The school year ends, and they fall into a kind of routine.

Ben's workload eases up considerably, though he's anything but idle: spending his mornings at a summer enrichment camp for elementary kids that's just a few blocks further than his own school and his afternoons working on special projects for Principal Sullivan.

The huge spectrum of summer festivals, performances, and attractions serves as more of a draw than it ever has before to pull him into the city, and rare is the weekend where he doesn't see George at least once.

The little gestures that had made Ben wonder, that had given him cause to hope, are entirely absent now. No more lingering hands on his back guiding him as they cross a busy street. No more friendly touches on his shoulder. He doesn't lean in close to catch at Ben's words, his eyes don't wander to Ben's lips when he talks. There are no more invitations to use his guest room. In fact, George will often be more conscious of the time than Ben himself, always careful to note when they ought to part ways so Ben can catch his train.

But other than this minor disappointment, Ben is having the best summer he's had in a long while. He feels oddly bereft when George has to spend a weekend away on business, and Ben has to content himself with going on long, lingering runs at East Rock, getting ahead in lesson planning, jotting down ideas for the speech team next year, or just sitting in his apartment with Netflix or one of the endless parade of books George buys for him.

The books become a thing all their own. Almost every week it's the same, *I saw this, and I thought of you. You told me you hadn't read it yet, and I thought you'd like it.* And Ben often starts devouring the volumes as soon as he gets on the train, with the echoing refrain in the back of his mind: *I thought of you. I thought of you. I thought of you.*

George, unsurprisingly, isn't much of a casual texter, but he will sometimes shoot Ben a message on a Wednesday afternoon to ask him how he likes the latest. Ben finds himself leaving long notes (not in the margins, of course, but on post-its or spare scraps of paper he slips between the leaves) of things he thinks George would be interested to hear his opinion on, or questions he thinks George might know how to answer.

Ben hoards information about George like a dragon hoards gold. He doesn't like to give the big things away, prefers to coax Ben into doing most of the talking, but Ben still learns enough to keep him fascinated by the man. He'd rather not talk about his time in the service, but Ben learns that he graduated from VMI, that he spent time in the Gulf, in Bosnia, in Afghanistan. He learns that he's a sucker for Shakespeare, but he's always wary of modern adaptations. He learns that he rather dislikes living in the city, but that he has little reason or desire return to the south. The more he discovers, the more he wants to know. And the dog days of summer drag on.

In lieu of their normal Friday night dinner, Anna joins him to meet up with Caleb and Nate. Instead of their normal, less-reputable haunt, they go for a nice drink at Ordinary and grab some takeout.

"You're in a better mood, Sunshine," says Nate, when they're heading back to Ben's apartment loaded down with bags of Thai.

"Ben's been in a bad mood?" asks Anna.

"I have not," Ben insists.

"Have to!" Nate exclaims. "You guys should have seen him the last few days of school. You would have thought Wilco had broken up or something, not that it was practically summertime."

Anna's watching him carefully, and even Caleb seems too wary to needle him about it, but they mercifully let the subject drop.

So they eat and they talk and they laugh at Ben's litany of hilarious stories about the six year olds he looks after during the week, and it's looking like a perfect evening until --

"Hey Ben, when'd you get these?" asks Nate, gesturing towards the bookshelf by Ben's window.

"Just over the last few weeks," says Ben.

Nate picks one of the new volumes up off the shelf, thumbing through it absently.

"These are really nice," he muses, reaching for another one. "Is this a first edition?" Ben shifts in his seat.

"I'm not sure," he says, uneasily.

"Holy shit," Nate exclaims, holding out the first volume of Schlesinger's RFK biography, which George had been so surprised to find Ben had never read before. "This one's actually signed! Where did you find this, Ben?"

"Uh, it was a gift," says Ben, praying that they leave it alone. But of course --

"A gift from who?" asks Anna, lightly.

"A friend, you know the one that I told you about, who lives in town. George." Ben meets Anna's eyes from across the kitchen counter, pleading soundlessly with her not to mention the wedding. He isn't ready to fight that fight right now.

Nate looks up from the first chapter of Schlesinger, which he's already started perusing. His eyes are narrowed.

"Who's George? And why is he buying you four hundred dollar books?"

Ben cringes. He has tried hard not to think of what all these gifts must have cost George, but, in all honesty, George's generosity has never struck him as such a strange thing. They'd had friends like this at Yale, he and Nate both, who'd been so free with their money (or their parents' money) either because they could not cope with the guilt of having so much of it or because it simply gave them pleasure to be generous with their good fortune. It had made Ben uncomfortable then, but he'd grown used to it. Still, he's not sure that's an explanation that's likely to satisfy.

"He's got a bookstore around the corner he goes to a lot. He knows the owner, I bet he gave him a good deal, that's all." Nate opens his mouth to press on, but Caleb elbows him indiscreetly in the ribs, gives him a look.

Ben knows what they want to ask. Where did you meet this guy? When? What does he do, that he has this kind of money? And what is he asking for in return for pristine first editions of famous historians?

Ben's heart pounds, awaiting the inevitable confrontation. He's almost ready to admit to having attended Benedict's wedding, if it will distract them from *this*. But he overestimate's his friends' willingness for confrontation, their willingness to dredge up all the memories the of the last time Ben gave them cause to worry like this. And the subject is dropped, with a heavy finality, like a stone in a millpond.

"Well, that's a good deal for you then," says Nate "Tell me if he runs into any first editions of Vonnegut he can get for cheap."

The summer passes far too quickly, in a blur of theaters and museums and outdoor concerts, the best food Ben has ever eaten in his life, and book after book after book.

With the return of the school year fast approaching, Ben decides to go on a limb and pick something for them to do himself, since until then George had planned all their weekends.

When he stumbles onto some information about a two-day Shakespeare marathon (the Wars of the Roses, reads the press release, promising a seamless rendition of all the Henry plays) he shoots George an email: does this sound like something he might want to do?

George responds less than an hour later, saying that he loves the idea, and he's already gotten

tickets, which, wow, Ben probably should have expected George to work that fast but it's still a surprise to see the crisp efficiency with which he can accomplish tasks like these. Ben responds at once.

"Looking forward to it."

Chapter End Notes

George is very lonely and it makes me very sad.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Please note the change in rating.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Saturday afternoon

They meet at the theatre. Ben looks well, but he's clearly savoring the last few days when he doesn't have to go clean-shaven, so there's a decided contrast between the clean cut of his jacket and the scruff that covers his cheeks.

"I've really been looking forward to this," Ben says as they make their way inside. "I dusted off my old Riverside, just to reread a few scenes. "

"I still struggle with the language a little," George admits. "And it's been a long time since I read them in order."

Ben shrugs.

"I might actually go through the Wikipedia summaries at intermission," he says. "I'm not completely sure I can always follow along either."

From anyone else it would be extremely patronizing, but George knows Ben is just trying to be nice. It's not the first time he's thought he's noticed Ben playing down his own considerable intelligence for George's benefit. He knows it doesn't come from a place of malice, so it doesn't bother him, but the power of Ben's mind never really ceases to exert a fascination over him.

And in truth, George has always preferred Shakespeare's comedies, or his Roman tragedies, to his histories, which had seemed dry as dust to him the first time he had been forced to read them as a schoolboy, and hadn't much improved in the meantime. But the last thing he had wanted to do was shoot down Ben's plan, particularly now that he could see the end of the free-and-easy days of summer coming upon them. So here he is.

"That might be a good idea," says George, as the house lights flash and the noise around them begins to abate.

They take their seats. It's a bit of a squeeze for Ben, but much more so for George. Politely, Ben tries to lean over, give him as much space as he can, but inevitably their knees still brush together. The situation only gets worse when a rather large man sits down on Ben's other side, and Ben is forced to settle himself closer to George, until George can practically feel the warmth of his skin radiating through the scant inch of space between their shoulders.

It doesn't escape him how uncomfortable Ben seems at this prospect, how he sits curled in on himself, arms crossed over his chest. George tries to give him his space, but there's only so much space to give.

As they settle in, he tries valiantly to ignore the subtle spicy scent of Ben's cologne as it wafts over him. It doesn't help that it's terribly warm in the theatre. It hadn't seemed enough to leave him even

uncomfortable before, but with Ben beside him the air suddenly seems stifling. George isn't wearing a tie, but the collar of his shirt suddenly feels strangely constricting, and he wonders if he might be able to undo one more of the top buttons without attracting any notice.

Then the curtain rises, and George wrenches his attention to the action on the stage.

The performances are excellent, but sitting through parts I and II of Henry VI takes more out of them than they had thought it would. So when Ben suggests that they forgo formal dinner plans and just grab take out, George sees no reason not to agree.

He starts getting a little nervous as they approach his building. He's never been very specific when describing where he lives, and while it is not as though he's gone out of his way to hide from Ben the fact that he has money, he knows this is...different. So he refrains from making any comments or qualifications, and just hopes that Ben won't think too badly of him.

Ben's eyes go a little wide when they enter the lobby, but he's quite clearly trying not to stare, just shoulders his weekender bag and follows George into the elevator. George glances at him surreptitiously in the mirrored walls, trying to detect any hint of discomfort in his posture, his expression, but he just looks vaguely distracted by the intricate patterns of the tile in the floor.

Ben doesn't say anything when George opens the door and ushers him inside, and George doesn't want to take the risk of asking him what he thinks, too afraid of getting a trite, tense, "you have a beautiful home" in response. He lets Ben take in the walls of windows, the expanse of his kitchen and living room, before pointing him towards the guest room.

"You can go ahead and put your things in there," he says. "If you want to shower, the bathroom's down the hall, second door on your right. Towels are under the sink."

The heavy, sticky heat of August hasn't yet receded into the mild respite of September, and Ben decides to take George up on the offer. George, in turn, waits for their food to get delivered, sitting at a chair in his living room, thumbing through a copy of *BusinessWeek*, wishing that he couldn't hear the sound of the shower running. Wishing that he wasn't so damnably *aware* of the fact that he finally has Ben here, in his space. Perhaps it's not as he had wanted him, at first, but he's here.

Half an hour later they're sitting on George's couch with cartons of Vietnamese food on their knees, Ben scrolling through Netflix with his chin in his hand, and George has to forcefully remind himself what this is *not*. Not an intimate moment, not an opportunity, not a *date*.

Instead, he tries to savor the novelty of eating dinner in his living room (something he hasn't done for years) and listening to Ben give the elevator pitches for all the TV show he casts up for George's consideration, even as he fails magnificently at using his chopsticks. With a low chuckle, George gets up to get him a fork, and when he comes back (god, it might just be his imagination) but Ben has moved himself just that much closer to the center of the couch. So when George sets himself down again, he leaves a little space between himself and the armrest on his side. The space between them still feels as wide as the Grand Canyon, compared to how close they were pressed in those seats, but a few fewer inches, in George's mind, can't possibly hurt.

Two episodes into *House of Cards*, George glances over to the other end of the couch to see that Ben's dozed off, his head lolling back onto the cushion, his hair a bright shock of gold against the dark brown leather of the sofa. George is almost tempted to just pull a blanket over him, let him sleep, but he knows Ben would be embarrassed to wake here in the morning, still in his clothes from the day before.

He switches off the TV, throwing the room into a twilight illuminated only by the light that filters up from the city streets below to reach his windows. Everything is quiet, and still. He rises from his seat.

"Ben," he says, nudging the boy's shoulder.

"Mmmh..." Ben doesn't start awake, but comes back to consciousness slowly, blinking bright eyes that glitter with the light of distant street lamps. He looks at George, holds his gaze for a long moment.

"It's getting late," George says, prompting.

"What time's it?" Ben mutters, his words half-slurred with sleep.

George tells him.

With a sigh, Ben rights himself. He runs a hand through his hair, which is already sticking up in a dozen different directions.

"Goodnight, then," Ben says.

"Sleep well," says George.

He watches Ben shuffle off to the guest room, and he sits alone in the darkened living room for a moment, before he comes back to himself.

He tries to go about his normal routine: but he can't focus on the book he's been reading and sleep doesn't come so easily as it usually does. He lies awake, staring at the ceiling, wondering if he really can hear the sound of Ben breathing on the other side of the wall or if he's merely imagining it.

For all that he drifts off late, he wakes up astonishingly early. He can't possibly expect Ben to rise for a few more hours yet, so he dutifully pulls on his running clothes and heads for the street. Perhaps a long, hard workout will do what a night's fretful sleep could not.

He pushes through the door about an hour later, already aching, a little less of a sweaty mess than he had been, since he had taken the time to get coffee and pastries from the bakery across the street.

It's still early, hardly past dawn, so he does not expect Ben to have stirred from his bed. But he's there, sitting in one of George's kitchen chairs, which he's pulled to the window to gaze out at the gold-limned skyline and the glimmering surface of the river.

He's wearing the pajamas he'd packed for himself: a pair of soft plaid flannel pants, well-worn, and a "Shades of Yale" t-shirt. His hair is still mussed, his cheeks still pink from sleep. George feels his breath catch in his chest.

He clears his throat, and Ben looks up with a start.

"How did you sleep?" he asks, as casually as he can.

"Great," Ben insists, unfolding himself from the chair, and taking the coffee George offers him (just a little cream, no sugar, which by happy chance is precisely how they both like it.)

"There's breakfast, if you want some," says George, opening up the paper bag and reaching for a

pair of plates.

And he tries his best. He really does. But when Ben practically moans into the first bite of his almond croissant (fresh from the oven, as the proprietor of the bakery had been eager to tell him) George is forced to excuse himself.

He makes a beeline for the shower. Gritting his teeth, he peels off t-shirt and shorts, turns on the water as hot as he can stand it.

Without asking his permission, his mind wanders back to the night before, and he imagines; instead of shifting away from Ben and shaking him awake, what it would have been like if he had lowered him to the cushions, poised himself above that lithe, strong body. Ben's eyes would flutter open, his expression momentarily confused. But then he would look up at George, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. George imagines what it might have been like to capture that perfect mouth in an insistent kiss, or to swoop down and suck a bruise or two or ten into the delicate skin just beneath his jaw, still smelling of the cologne that George had bought for him...

He imagines Ben pulling away, grinning wickedly, reaching down and deftly undoing the buttons of George's slacks, slipping his hand under the waistband of George's boxers. George presses the heel of his hand to his groin, resisting, for as long as he can, the power of that image.

He pictures Ben's hand, slender and smooth (maybe with a pen callous at the tip of his middle finger, but otherwise unmarred) taking hold of him, moving so achingly slowly. His own touch can't compare, but the fantasy is so vivid he hardly notices: his mind's eye is overwhelmed by the imagined sound of Ben's heavy breathing, the imagined sensation of Ben's skin under his mouth. Through the haze of desire that clouds it, his brain conjures up the image of a still-drowsy Ben sliding off the side of the couch to kneel in front of him, tugging George's slacks farther down as he goes, his hands running slowly down the line of George's thighs, thumbs digging into the muscle, like he's holding on for dear life...

It's this picture that does him in: Ben looking up at him through long lashes, blue eyes undimmed even in the faint light of the television. He reaches out a hand to card his fingers through that mess of soft honey brown hair, Ben hums low in his throat and...

And George paints his release over the glass wall of the shower, one hand thankfully muffling his own moans.

A wave of guilt comes roaring to fill the space in his consciousness newly-vacated by his arousal. God, the boy is *here*, right now, sitting at his kitchen table. And George is going to have to face him, going to have to sit beside him in those cramped theatre seats, their knees knocking together.

He's sure he's being punished for something.

The second day of performances are much harder to focus on than the first. George's mind is going in a million different directions at once. He keeps being wrenched back into the events of the morning, and now he has to deal with the fact that since Ben's shower last night he smells like George's own soap.

But it isn't just that he's torturing himself. Ben seems...different, since the night before. More relaxed. His smiles in George's direction linger a little longer, the space between their bodies where they're crammed into those damnable seats, a little less fraught with invisible tension. It reminds George of those early days, when he had still thought Ben was interested in him and that their entanglement was on track to be like so many others George had had before: exhilarating,

satisfying, and brief. And he has to wonder, what's changed?

The players finally, *finally* make it to the end of Henry VI Part III, and commence Richard III, the one that George actually knows best.

He's never been one to feel sympathetic towards a villain, but the story grabs him as surely as it did the first time he ever read it; or it would have done, if he didn't have so much else on his mind. But the scene at Bosworth Field is staged so skillfully that even he is drawn out of the mire of his thoughts, at least for a moment. Beside him, Ben is rapt, his eyes wide. And George is deep, deep in the moment, until one line throws him out again.

I have set my life upon a cast,

And I will stand the hazard of the die.

The line strikes him like lightning out of a clear sky, and all of a sudden his months of hesitation, his doubt, and all the residual fears of a life spent being so *careful* are exposed for what they are. And he makes a decision.

Chapter End Notes

For those who care to know, Shades of Yale is the best acapella group ever in history. Whiffen-who?

I've always head-canoned Ben as a secret brainiac. It's not something that's often emphasized in the show, but considering the fact that he was ahead of most of his Yale classmates, that he devised the code used by the Culper ring by himself I thought it wasn't too much of a leap. Come into my inbox and ask me about Ben in glasses. I have thoughts.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Please note the change in rating. It may be mostly precautionary, but if this chapter doesn't quite earn its E rating, other ones certainly will.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Saturday afternoon.

"Hung be the heavens with black, yield day to night!

Comets, importing change of times and states,

Brandish your crystal tresses in the sky..."

Ben shifts forward in his chair, the opening lines of the play washing over him. He wants to sink into the scene, to lose himself in it, but he's too anchored in them moment, held down by the necessity of keeping his body poised in this precarious position he's been placed in.

If he leans too far to the left, he risks choking on the noxious fumes of a fellow audience member's cologne. But too far to the right and...well. He already feels like he's too far into George's personal space as it is. They didn't build these seats with men of his proportions in mind, and it shows.

Ben knows if he were to ask, George would say that it doesn't bother him at all, but he certainly doesn't look at ease.

Ben sinks lower into his own seat, hunches a little more, wraps his arms a little more tightly around himself.

They make it to the first intermission, and George rises to excuse himself with startling abruptness and without a second glance in Ben's direction. Left alone, Ben makes his way to the bathroom. He doesn't really need to take a piss, but the thought of just sitting in that theatre is intolerable. So he stares at himself in the mirror, wondering where he's misstepped.

He runs a hand thoughtfully over his chin, the sensation of stubble scraping under his palm still novel enough for him to take notice. He probably should have shaved for this? He thought George had stared just a beat too long at his face when they had greeted each other at the door, but he couldn't be sure that was what the problem was. And it wasn't as though he was running around sporting Caleb's Duck Dynasty beard, or that obnoxious little goatee Nate sometimes sports for a few weeks at a time until Ben successfully pesters him into shaving. So he looks himself over (nothing inside-out, no tags peering out through the collar of his shirt or the waistband of his pants) discreetly checks his breath, sniffs under his armpit. But nothing seems amiss. So he hastens back, and tries not to think too hard about it.

George dozes off at least once during Part II. Ben only notices because of the sudden heavy press of George's leg against his own, the way his hand falls open on the armrest.

Ben steals a glance. He looks curiously tense even in sleep, his brows drawn, his mouth pinched. The humidity has started to make his hair (which Ben has always rather liked) start to go a little wild. He looks like he's probably going to have to get it cut soon, the reddish brown strands, flecked with grey at the temples, curling a little around his ears. Ben has to stifle the sudden urge to smooth a hand across George's forehead, to run his fingers over his scalp until the strange brittleness retreats from his expression. He could do it, too, could just drape his arm around the back of George's seat, reach up...

He shakes himself to banish that thought. He must be going a little drama-drunk from all the emotion radiating off the stage, to be thinking like this.

He's done well, he really thinks he has, in burying his little crush on George. He feels like they've been on the same page, and it's been...well, it's something he doesn't want to ruin.

So he just enjoys the sensation of sitting side-by-side, luxuriates in the press of George's shoulder against his own, and tries to enjoy the play.

The late August heat is fairly oppressive as the exit the theatre, and Ben already feels like he's wilting a little.

"Was there anything in particular you wanted for dinner?" George asks, and Ben purses his lips, weighing how appropriate is the request he wants to make.

"Maybe we can just skip out on the sit-down thing? Grab some take out? My treat."

"That's not necessary."

"I know," says Ben, placating, "but it's the least I could do after you agreeing to let me stay with you." (not to mention buying their tickets, but just as with the rest of the money George has spent on Ben since they've met, he would rather not mention it.)

George considers for a moment.

"I don't see why not. But I'm not sure I'm the best person to ask for recommendations. I don't often order in, so I might not know --"

"That's okay," says Ben. "I'll just use Seamless, it'll be fine."

That precipitates a quarter-hour conversation, first about what "Seamless" even is, then how it works, then what Ben's thoughts on the mobile economy are, and by the end of it Ben's quite recovered from the slight funk he'd been in in the theatre, and reassured that George does not in fact find his presence burdensome.

George does seem a little antsy, though, as they approach his apartment building. Ben's never asked where he lives, specifically. And while he might have expected it to be somewhere nice, he never really pictured *this*.

Their cab pulls into the circle of a soaring glass-clad high rise on West End Ave, and Ben tries not to gape at the shining travertine floors and walls and the glittering modernist chandelier over the lobby.

The elevator lets them out on George's floor, and Ben has to bite back a gasp. The first thing he sees is an expansive view of the river through the walls of windows that run along the far and left walls. The furniture is sparse, but not quite spartan. It looks clean and comfortable and generally

like far too much space for one person to bounce around in by themselves.

It's a little less traditional than what he'd thought George would go for, but it's not as though it's so avant-garde or anything that he's genuinely surprised. But the more he sees, the more it really does click with what he already knows of George's tastes: elegant without being opulent, not trendy, not not mired in the past. Ben likes it.

George shows him through the kitchen (all pale maple cabinets and sleek steel hardware) and gestures towards an open door down the hallway.

"You can go ahead and put your things in there," he says. "If you want to shower, the bathroom's down the hall, second door on your right. Towels are under the sink."

Ben goes where he points. There's a generous looking bed, piled with a down comforter and an abundance of pillows. He has his own view, looking South towards Midtown. The city glitters in the sunset, all its gritty imperfection erased when he looks from thirty stories up. He could sit in the window and stare all day, but he feels positively gross from the sticky summer heat and rather wants to take George up on his offer to use his shower.

He goes into the bathroom, strips, steps into the shower and luxuriates for a moment under the really incredible water pressure. He reaches for the bottle of shampoo and squirts some into his hand, and is met at once with a wave of the familiar smell of George's hair. He breathes it in, then, after a few moments of indecision, checks the label. He memorizes it, and resigns himself to the expenditure as soon as he gets home. He already knows he will not be able to resist the temptation to buy some for himself.

He follows that with George's soap, then wraps himself in George's towels (and god, even these smell like whatever subtle detergent he uses.)

It seems presumptuous to get into his pajamas so early, so he slips back into his clothes from the day, feeling very much renewed. When he goes into the living room, George is just returning from the lobby with a bag of Vietnamese food tucked under his arm.

Ben settles himself on the sumptuous brown leather couch.

"What do you feel like watching?" he asks.

"I'm sure I have no idea what's good right now. You decide," says George.

Ben shakes his head.

"Half of the fun of Netflix is choosing what you want to watch. It's all part of the experience."

George looks rightly skeptical, but he doesn't argue.

Initially Ben thinks they might want a change of pace from all the heaviness they'd sat through on stage that day, but all the comedies look ridiculous (and not in a good way) and Ben doesn't want to touch the romances with a ten-foot pole. So, ironically, they settle on House of Cards. Ben would rather watch the West Wing, with the mood he's in, but George has already seen it all and apparently his assistant and his wife are big Kevin Spacey fans, have been exhorting George to give the show a try for months.

"He described it as 'C-Span meets Macbeth,' which...well, I won't pretend to understand what that means," says George, and Ben is so charmed by the little furrow of consternation that appears between his brows that he agrees to give it a try.

It's worth it. He's never noticed the similarities between Spacey's drawl and the subtle accent that George very occasionally slips into when he's animated about something, the slight rounding of his vowels that always makes Ben fight back a smile.

He's not doing so well with his chopsticks, and almost drops a piece of his bahn xeo on the floor, before, at George's eloquently-raised eyebrow, he consents to switch to a fork.

When George is gone, Ben scoots closer to the center of the couch to pick up a wayward bean sprout that hadn't stayed on the plate, then tucks his sock-clad feet underneath him so he can get comfortable. He thinks, when George sits back down, that he's moved a few inches closer to where Ben sits, but he can't be sure. He tries not to overthink it.

He's not precisely sure when he falls asleep, but he is awakened by the touch of George's hand on his shoulder.

"It's getting late," George says, quietly, his voice a little hoarse. Ben can't get a good look at him through the haze of sleep and the dim light of the living room.

"What time's it?" Ben asks.

He doesn't want to get up. He doesn't want to go to bed in that pristine, empty guest room. He wants to reach out a hand and pull George to him, tuck his face into the space between George's neck and shoulders, to breathe him in. He wants George, warm and solid, poised above him...

But Ben pulls himself upright, swings his legs over the side of the couch, and stands. George does not look at him, but he does not move away.

"Goodnight, then," Ben says.

"Sleep well," says George. But Ben does not hear him, still shaking himself awake enough to make it to his room.

He pulls on a t-shirt, but it's warm enough that he decides to forgo the flannel pajama bottoms he packed for himself, and he slides between the sheets, sighs contentedly. It may very well be the most comfortable bed he's ever slept in. The sheets have a thread count that's probably higher than his monthly rent. He burrows deeper into the softness of the mattress, feels the space around his body start to warm.

He'd been meaning to get through another chapter of his book, but his mind drifts off quite without his permission. Ben doesn't often dream. But tonight he does.

He's lying on his front, on a bed like a cloud, face buried in a pillow that smells like...Christmas morning. Or the last day of school before summer vacation. Or every one of his favorite songs from high school. Or all of those things at once.

He feels two broad hands settle on the plane of his back, and he moans into the pillow. They might be magic, digging into all the places where his tension hides itself away from even his own notice.

"Is that better?" asks a low, whiskey-smooth voice. Ben sighs his affirmative, and those hands go to work in other ways, pulling his undershirt up his back, pulling his boxers down...

The hands haul him up so that he's resting on his elbows and knees, and blunt, clever fingers start to work at him. Then a slick, clever tongue.

*Ben pushes back, chases the sensation. The voice is murmuring right in his ear now (the logistical problems with this scenario entirely irrelevant to his dream-self) and steady stream of praise and filthy promises: how hot, how wet, how **eager** he is, how good Ben's going to look on his cock, such a pretty little thing, you can come just from this can't you? I bet you can. How much do you want it? Tell me. Show me.*

Ben wakes up, and all he can do is pray that George doesn't do his own laundry. He pulls the sheet off the bed, has to strip out of his boxers, balls them up and stuffs them in a side-pocket of his duffle bag, then pulls on the drawstring pants he'd (thankfully) neglected to put on before. He has to resist the urge to kick at the bedframe, *furious* at himself.

He gets back into bed, just lies on top of the covers and stares at the ceiling. He would be lying if he said he hadn't had the occasional dream or inadvertent fantasy about George before. But it had never been this vivid. And it had never caused him to embarrass himself like this, as though he were a teenager again.

And he can imagine its continuation, can imagine the door opening, George stepping inside, and Ben rising to meet him. Or he might go out the door himself, turn down the hallway to where George sleeps, slide under the comforter and...

"Get it *together* Tallmadge," he mutters to himself.

So, fine, he hasn't gotten over his little crush, try as he has. The worst thing, perhaps, is that he can't just excuse it as a moment of momentary sleep-induced madness. Waking up hasn't brought him back to his senses, like it should. He still wants George as much as he did in the midst of the fever-hot haze of the dream.

And, alright, maybe he hasn't quite figured out what George's deal is, what he's getting for all his trouble. Maybe he has deliberately refrained from asking those questions, refrained from admitting the truth of how he's been spending his time to Anna or Caleb or Nate, because he knows how it looks. He knows what they would think, what they would tell him, if they felt like they had to speak up. He knows they wouldn't be able to understand, because even *he* doesn't understand. Instead, he's chosen to make assumptions, to resist the uncomfortable possibility that there's more to his motivation than Ben wants to see.

But he's feeling the pressure of time. He knows once he returns to work that things will be different, that taking the train down every weekend will be harder to do. And even if it's not, Ben knows that he becomes horribly boring when school is in full swing, so much of his conversation pivoting to the mundane topics of his students' escapades or his ideas for the speech team. Reason tells him that George will probably tire of his friendship fast (even as his instincts say otherwise.)

In that case, he thinks, what does he have to lose? If his choice is between driving George away because he no longer possesses an abundance of available time, or driving him away by giving voice to...whatever this is that he feels, then why not take the chance?

Why not take the chance?

It's a bold thought, but sound, and forms a foundation on which Ben finds himself building a plan to do just that, even as his resolve strengthens and deepens his commitment to follow through.

He falls back asleep after a few hours, still on top of the duvet, but he sleeps better than he could have thought he would, content in his decision.

He wakes up to the sound of the heavy front door opening and closing with a bang. Ben wanders

into the kitchen, sees that the chain is off the lock, and figures George just went out for coffee or something. So he sits in the window and waits for him to return, watches the city wake up, feels the sunlight wash over his face.

He thinks through his plan again, walks through the words he wants to say, and tries to breathe through the butterflies threatening to burst from his stomach. But he's determined. He's determined to try.

George comes back after Ben's been up for maybe an hour, and they sit down to breakfast together. The sound Ben makes at the first bite of his croissant is half-involuntary, but he certainly plays it up a little for the benefit of his audience. He's not sure what reaction he's going for (he just knows he wants *some* reaction) and the sudden flush that comes into George's cheeks, the way he pushes back from the table like he's been electrified, is more than he could have hoped for.

George returns from his shower fully dressed in a fresh shirt and slacks, though they have some time yet before they really need to be anywhere. Ben offers to let George get some work done if he needs to (he knows there's always work waiting for him) while he sends some e-mails from his phone, and they spend a few hours largely in companionable silence, Ben still in his pajamas. It's something he could definitely get used to.

He thinks he catches George sneaking glances at him now and then, when he runs a hand through his hair or stretches his arms above his head with a yawn, and it's enough to keep him encouraged.

When the last lines of Richard III have been uttered and the company take their bows, Ben decides to act.

"I could really go for a cup of coffee," he says, as George stifles a yawn behind his hand. "And I think you could too," he adds with a chuckle. He does have a feeling that George didn't sleep so well last night, but he knows better than to ask.

They sit down in a coffee bar a few blocks from the theatre. The scowling, man-bunned barista reminds Ben of the time he and Nate went to eat at some vegan cafe in New Haven and they couldn't get the waiter to tell them what the dairy-free, soy-free, grain-free, gluten-free grilled cheese sandwich was *actually* made of, and that led to an absurd joke about "un-cheese" that has never made any kind of sense to anyone but them. But he saves that story for another time. He's got a job to do.

George too looks curiously determined, almost grimly so. But it could just be residual sleepiness. Ben can't be sure.

"So, I thought it was great. The show, I mean," Ben begins. "A great way to end the summer. Even if it did drag on a bit," he says, with a crooked smile.

George waves his hand.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it. I did too, more than I thought I would." He takes a pause, says, "Ben, I-" just as Ben starts to say "I wanted to thank-" and they are suspended in an awkward moment.

"You first," says George.

Well, thinks Ben, why the hell not?

"I just was going to say, I wanted to thank you for these last few months. They've been, well, they've been great. And I know things are likely going to change a bit once it's harder for me to get

out to the city."

"I understand," says George.

"I just bring it up, because I know there's been some...miscommunication," says Ben, his gut twisting with nerves now. "I think I made some assumptions that weren't -- that may not have been correct."

George frowns. His phone is buzzing in his pocket, but he ignores it.

"About what?" he asks, warily.

"About why you wanted to spend time with me. I thought, maybe...but then you made it clear you didn't think of me in that way."

"I wanted to spend time with you because I enjoy your company," says George, a little quietly, a slight *edge* to his voice that Ben thinks might be promising. His phone starts ringing a second time. "After, I thought, perhaps, you had changed your mind, or- "

"I hadn't," says Ben, too quickly. "I was confused. And the timing wasn't right, I think. But I hadn't changed my mind. I still haven't."

George's eyes go wide.

"Ben, I -"

Now there's a second buzzing, trilling from George's other pocket. With a bitten-off curse, George pulls the small, non-descript flip phone from inside his jacket.

"What is it?" he barks, with none of his usual polish.

The person on the other end of the line starts talking very loud, very fast. Ben thinks he can pick out a few spare syllables, but nothing distinct. *Missing* , and *just heard* , and something that sounds like *patent office* (but that can't possibly be right.)

"Henry, Henry slow down," says George tersely. "What -- are you sure?"

More agitated monologuing from the other end of the line.

"When?" asks George, through clenched teeth. "It's *all* gone? Was there any evidence of a -- okay. Okay, I'll be right there."

He snaps the phone shut, turns back to Ben, running a frustrated hand through his hair.

"I'm so sorry, Ben. I have to take care of this."

"I understand," says Ben, trying so hard to sound cheerful. "Go. Do what you have to do."

"I'm going to call you," says George, fiercely. "I will."

"I know," says Ben.

And George goes.

Re: George's taste in interior decorating: here is how you know that I'm writing about an alternate universe version of a television character and not the actual historical Washington. Cause if you've ever visited Mount Vernon, "elegant without opulence, not trendy, but not mired in the past" is sooooo not his style. No one writes that many letters about getting imported marble for a chimney or paints their dining room that particularly awful shade of green if they're not 100% caught up in the latest trends.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Heads up folks, this chapter contains some potentially triggering material which leads to a character getting a pretty severe panic attack. Read at your own risk.

Also, I did a speedy delivery job on this chapter because it may be the last one for a week or so. I'm moving to new city on Friday and real life comes first. Please try to be patient with me.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

George does call, like he'd promised, but only after several anxious days. And when he does, it isn't to resume their previous conversation, but to make a proposition.

"I've been invited to attend some fundraiser gala, and I'd rather not go, in all honesty. But it's for an educational charity in the city and there will be quite a few members of the Board of Regents there, and some other people it might be good for you to meet. It's up to you, but I had hoped that, afterward, we might get the chance to talk again?"

The way George says "talk," his voice pitched low, tells Ben all he needs to know about what he actually hopes will be waiting for them at the conclusion of the evening, and Ben has to suppress a shudder.

"How late will it go?" Ben asks, quietly. "I just mean, I can pack a bag--"

"Do that," says George, before he has to hang up. Ben breathes out in a rush, suddenly feeling very warm under the collar. And then he has an idea.

He had offered to just meet George at the event, but he insists on picking Ben up at the station, in a black A8 that purrs while it idles at the curb. Ben hops in.

They return to George's place so Ben can drop his bag and change, and Ben thinks it's honestly a good thing they timed things so tightly or he knows he would not be able to resist the temptation to blow the whole ordeal off, both the gala and their inevitable conversation, and just make use of some of the many convenient horizontal (and vertical) surfaces in George's apartment.

The feeling buzzes just under the surface of his awareness, has done since he stepped out of the train station: his fingers itch to touch George, his skin itches to be touched.

You can wait, Tallmadge, he says to himself. *You've waited months, you can wait a few more hours.* And besides, he wants to be able to give George the surprise he's been planning.

He goes and changes in the guest room, though it doesn't escape him when George opens his mouth to suggest that Ben can put his things in the Master if he wants. Still, that feels a little presumptuous and he doesn't want to tempt fate. They've had too many close calls as it is.

So he unzips the garment bag he brought to reveal the dark-grey suit he'd bought himself, not with George, but on his advice, as well as the deep blue tie that George *had* purchased for him on whim.

And then, last but not least..the shirt. The pale blue shirt from the wedding, which Ben had taken in to be altered to his own measurements. It fits him perfectly now, skimming his sides trimly without the need for safety pins.

He'd stood in the mirror for ten whole minutes when he'd first gotten it back from the tailors, feeling horribly vain but also unable to keep from loving the way he felt in it, unable to keep from imagining the look on George's face when he saw him in it.

He isn't disappointed.

George is sitting at his kitchen table, on his phone, when Ben comes in. Ben sees his eyes go wide, his phone get set down on the table-top with such force that Ben worries for the touchscreen. But just as soon as the window to his thoughts cracks open, George shuts it again.

"You look very well," he says, almost stammering.

Ben grins, content (for now) with the mild praise.

"Don't we need to leave?" Ben asks, and, god, but he really is hoping for George to say no, for them to change their minds and for George to back him up into the bedroom and...

But George just rises from the table to get his jacket, and they go down to the lobby, hop in the first available cab.

On the way there, George fills Ben in on all the people Ben ought to speak to while they're there, telling him which ones George should introduce him to, which ones Ben can approach on his own. Ben scarcely gets a word in edgewise until they're nearly at their destination, cutting into a moment of silence with:

"So, was everything alright? The other day, that call you got, you seemed a little freaked."

George grimaces.

"It...wasn't so bad as I feared," he says, and immediately Ben doubts him.

"Can you tell me what it was about?" he offers. "I mean, I understand if you can't."

George sighs, and Ben is momentarily sure he's overstepped, until George continues.

"Do you recall the project I told you about? Back, well, it would have been months ago now."

Ben frowns.

"The fortified...what was it...sorghum? Or something?"

"It was part of a larger initiative, developing a kind of one-step genetic process for improving the nutritional content of all kinds of food crops. A great deal of our data, the whole project, in fact, went missing. And then the idea turned up in a patent application filed by one of our rivals."

"What, all of it?"

George wrinkles his nose.

"Our head of R&D is very old-fashioned. Doesn't like to keep anything in the cloud, portable hard drives and notebooks only. We aren't sure what happened, but they're gone."

Ben lets out a sympathetic sigh.

"I'm sorry. That's honestly awful. But this isn't your normal line of work, right? Genetic modification?"

"No. It's a vanity project, mostly. We had the money to spend, and I thought, why not spend it on this? There wasn't much expectation of a return on our investment to begin with."

It's obvious that George is worried not so much about the disruption of a project that had never promised to be lucrative (though Ben does think it a shame, since it had seemed like important work that might have helped a lot of people) as he is by the fact that their data was so fundamentally insecure. Hackers can't steal into a lab and ransack through offices. This threat was something different, something more real.

Ben has at least a dozen more questions, but before he can ask them, their cab pulls up to the curb.

Ben's heard of the organization hosting the dinner, but doesn't know much about them besides the fact that they bring CEOs into schools to do things like talk about how successful they are (honestly, it's not the kind of academic enrichment Ben has ever thought might be useful for *his* students) and George's company apparently gives them a lot of money.

Ben goes to work, focusing on seeking out the names George had given him, so he's not distracted by the promise of what waits for him when he leaves this place and returns to George's. But he also needs to keep himself from getting caught up in the mystery of this strange data theft, which had caught hold of him like his old logic puzzles from when he was a kid, or the codes he used to draw up for fun, the whirling wheels of his mathematical mind already set to spinning.

George sticks with him for a while, but is soon called away by a colleague (a large man, who, to Ben's eyes, looks like he'd normally be quite jovial, but tonight seems terribly troubled by something.) So he mingles, introduces himself, has some nice conversations that stay firmly rooted in shop talk or the weather. He keeps himself firmly apolitical, even when the suits around him seem eager to start an argument, keeps it light, keeps it focused, remembering always that if he makes himself disagreeable it's only going to reflect poorly on George.

His name floats around the room, when people find out who he came here with, and he tries his best not to make a thing of it. He hadn't really had time to ask George what to do if people asked these kinds of questions (he knows George is ostensibly out, at least to the people he works with) but he just kind of rolls with it, decides to keep their options open on the off-chance that they need to show up at something like this again.

He's just pulling away from a chat with a superintendent from a school district near Rochester, having exchanged contact information and feeling very productive and professional indeed, when he's approached by a group of three snappily-dressed men.

They strike him at once as guys with training in Sales. He's given rapid-fire introductions, last names only (Wilkinson, Learned, and Poor) which, put together in that order, make Ben want to laugh. But his smile is mirrored back at him in a way he is not sure he likes.

"We've been meaning to come and say hello," says one of them (Wilkinson? Ben's already having a hard time keeping track)

"We've heard so much about you," says Guy #2.

"Well it's good to meet you all," says Ben, his smile going a little stiff. "I didn't realize anyone here

even knew who I was."

"Oh, your reputation precedes you," says the third, before taking a smooth sip of the drink in his hand.

Ben frowns. What could he mean by that?

"Do you work with George?" he asks.

"Not directly. We're all under the Continental umbrella, same as him. But MVC -- that is, Mount Vernon Corp's always kind of done its own thing. No, we've got another friend in common."

Ben's stomach flips. They can't possibly be talking about...

But then Wilkinson (it's definitely Wilkinson, Ben is almost sure) leans in close, so no one outside the four of them can hear what he whispers in Ben's ear.

"He's told us so many good things. Honestly, we never would have believed what he said about how pretty you were until we saw it for ourselves."

Ben steps back, his face a mask of hard fury.

"I don't know who or what you're talking about," he says, his voice flint-hard. But they just smile back at him, and that smile is one that he knows, that he well-remembers. Honestly, all he wants to do is wipe the smirks off their faces, but he knows this isn't the time or the place. All he would do is embarrass George, if not get him into actual trouble. But he needs to get out of here, and he needs to do it now.

However, as he tries to push his way past the (now claustrophobically close) circle of men, one of them grabs his upper arm and holds on tight, leans in close enough that Ben can smell the rail whiskey and cigarette smoke on his breath.

"C'mon now. Arnold told us you spooked easily, but we can be nice."

Ben's heart is racing. His body screams at him to lash out, to fight, to *force* them to let him go. But then he sees George across the room, listening politely to someone that Ben knows must be important, and he keeps himself in check, just enough.

"Go to hell," he hisses, and, wrenching the hand from its iron grip, practically sprints away.

He loses himself back in the crowd, but he can't stop seeing, or imagining he sees, knowing looks from his fellow guests. He feels their eyes look him up and down, their faces bearing looks of nakedly predacious hunger. His suit feels too tight, too much, the lights too bright. He can't get in enough oxygen.

How many people here know who he is? How many had heard these...stories? How many of Benedict's coworkers might he have told?

George takes notice of him quickly enough, frowns at the look on Ben's face and begins to move toward him. And Ben is so relieved, so comforted by that look of stony concern, by the way he puts his hand on Ben's shoulder.

Then a memory washes over him like a tidal wave. *George, standing in front of the open door of his car, Ben asking him: "How do you know the happy couple?" "Benedict and I are...former colleagues."* Former colleagues. Was that why George had taken such an interest in him? Why he

had persisted for so long? Had Arnold given reason to think that it might be worth his while?

He jerks backward, away from George's touch.

"I have to leave," he stammers. "I'm sorry. I'll see myself to the station."

"Ben," says George, stricken, "what's the matter with you? What's going on?"

And Ben knows what he's thinking, knows that it just looks like he's backing out again, changing his mind for no reason *again*. But he can't answer. He can feel his face going hot, his head going light. He needs to get outside.

There's no energy left in his body to protest the warm arm that George settles around his waist, guiding him gently out into the hot but blessedly fresh late-summer night. Ben isn't sick all over the sidewalk, but it's a near miss.

"We're going home," says George, too determined for Ben to tell if he's confused by his bizarre behavior. And Ben can't even argue, the prospect of dragging himself to the station (is there even a train he can catch?) and dragging himself home, just far too daunting.

He'll go back with George, if that's his only option. He'll pay the price for George's hospitality, and let him get his money's worth. Since that is, apparently, all he'll ever be good for or known for. He already owes George so much. Surely this was always what was coming.

He lets George usher him into a waiting cab, lets George settle him on the bench seat. He doesn't realize that he's crying until George is carefully, tentatively pulling him in. And between the gentle pressure he keeps on Ben's back and the hand stroking sweetly through his hair and his constant, quiet assurances (*We're almost there, it's alright, it's alright*) he just...shatters. He can't choke the tears back, his body racked now and again by silent sobs.

He wants to get himself together, to *explain* himself, to apologize for getting salt tracks and snot all over the lapels of George's beautiful jacket. But he can't do any of those things.

The cabby and the doorman probably just assume he's drunk as George helps him inside. He manages to keep his feet, to move forward under his own power, but it's a near thing.

"Almost there," George assures him for what might be the twentieth time. Then they're through the front door, and the Master bedroom is closest, so that's where George takes him. He sits Ben down on the edge of the bed, kneels to untie his shoes.

Ben tries to protest, but the words come out slurred and feeble. George gets him out of his jacket and tie, then helps him under the covers. He excuses himself for a moment, goes into the bathroom, and returns with a half-glass of lukewarm water.

"Can you drink any of this?"

Ben tries, but doesn't get far. He thinks George's hands are shaking, but he can't be sure.

"Try and get some rest," he says. "I'll be just down the hall, if there's anything at all you need."

Ben's eyes are closed. When George brushes his cheek, his hand is so gentle that Ben almost doesn't notice it. But he reaches out anyway, and grabs George's wrist, his eyes fluttering open.

"Please don't," he says, voice hoarse. "Please stay."

George flinches, but Ben doesn't let go. Finally, he relents. Kicks out of his own shoes, leaves tie and jacket and belt in a pile on the floor, and gets into bed on Ben's other side. He waits, patient and still, for Ben to move towards him before drawing him up to lie against his chest.

Ben sleeps.

When he wakes, the digital clock on the nightstand displays "3:30" and he's so hard that he's aching with it.

Don't move, he thinks. *Don't move, don't think about it, it will go away. It will. Don't. Move.*

But the hand on his abdomen and the warm breath on the back of his neck consume the whole of his awareness, and he can't sail his mind to safer shores.

He's sure it can't be real, sure he's just projecting the last scraps of whatever subconscious fantasies brought him to this sorry state in the first place, when he feels the hand pressed just beneath his rib cage hold him tighter. He's *sure* he's still dreaming when he feels the imprint of an open mouth on his nape.

He's ready to damn self-restraint and get out of bed to jerk off in the bathroom, when he feels the unmistakable sensation of George shifting behind him.

Then he's pulling Ben closer, his hand trailing down to grip loosely at the crest of his hip. And Ben shouldn't, he *can't*, but he inches his hips backward to press against the solid form that surrounds him, and gets to savor the hiss of George's indrawn breath.

He wants to say he's sorry, but then George's palm is hovering, mere millimeters over the evident bulge in Ben's slacks.

"Is this alright?" George asks, his voice thick and sleep-rough. "Would you like me to--"

"*God* yes," groans Ben, without so much as a second thought. And then George is working at the fly of Ben's pants one-handed, slipping his hand (huge and hot and more dexterous than Ben had ever let himself imagine) under the waistband. And then Ben is rocking into it, caught between the sweet friction of George's grip (too loose, too tentative, until Ben urges him *harder* and he instantly complies) and the wall of George's body behind him, the erection that he can feel pressing against the curve of his ass.

It doesn't take him long, George somehow managing to make every pull long and sweet and slow even despite the difficult angle. He feels George's mouth ghost over the shell of his ear, and maybe he does say *come on Ben, come for me* or maybe Ben just hallucinates it, but either way it's enough to send him tumbling over the precipice, the keening sound he makes half-muffled by the pillow he rests on.

He tries to turn around, a nagging voice at the back of his exhausted mind urging him to reciprocate. But George just holds him in place.

"Don't worry about it," he says. "Go back to sleep."

"But--"

"*Sleep.*"

Helpless to do otherwise, Ben obeys.

Chapter End Notes

Apparently I can't stop thinking about these losers and their stupid clothes.

James Wilkinson, Enoch Poor, and Ebenezer Learned were all present at the Battle of Saratoga, and either co-equal with or under Benedict Arnold's command. I know nothing about them, so if they were in fact decent dudes, I apologize for making their modern fictional analogues into such sleazebags.

Also, I was tempted to go a little more detail into the science of the project George describes, the one whose data got stolen by ~person or persons unknown~ but there was no way to do it without being awful and technical (confession time: at one point George was literally going to use the phrase "splice variants" in his explanation, so honestly thank god I came to my senses.) However, if you are interested in knowing more about the details, this kind of work isn't exactly what I do for a living, but it comes pretty close, so I would be happy to blab about it to you.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Chapter 8

The moment George can be sure that Ben has fallen properly asleep again, he slowly, *slowly* eases the boy out of his arms and slips from the bed. He strides to the bathroom, closes the door, and flicks on the light.

He stares at his reflection. He looks so *old*, even under the relatively forgiving glow of the incandescents. With his gaze he traces the lines of his crow's feet, his frown lines. He'd never really had much cause to notice the topography of his own face before. It was so tangential to his everyday pursuits, and the planes and contours changed so gradually that he had hardly registered his own steady, inevitable decline into middle age.

But he feels his age now, without a doubt. So he's a cradle robber too, on top of everything else.

With a ragged sigh, he turns on the hot water, lets it run until it's practically steaming out of the faucet. He pumps some soap into his palm and starts to wash the remains of Ben's release from his hand. He spends far too long under the scalding hot water, scrubbing furiously at every angle and crevice; in the webbing of his fingers, under the nails, trying to remove every trace.

How could he *do* this? The boy was clearly deeply distressed, possibly even unwell. George even thinks he has some idea of what it is that's troubling him, though he hadn't wanted to jump to any conclusions.

He splashes some cold water on his face once his hands are at least visibly clean. He's still painfully hard in his slacks. But he ignores it.

He's tempted to go into the shower and take care of the problem, but he will not. He's tempted (sorely tempted) to return to the warm folds of the bed, to nudge Ben awake, and have *him* take care of the problem, but he *absolutely* will not.

He'd been wrong, he thinks. He'd been wrong to imagine that there was some way to pursue something more serious with the boy. That he could somehow move past the fact that George had only initiated their connection in the first place because he had been hoping for something like his usual modus operandi: a quick, convenient fling, a few satisfying fucks, and no further consequences.

Perhaps this is for the best. Perhaps it was good that this had happened now, and not down the line, once Ben had had time to get properly attached. He might have gone on deceiving himself for months.

He resists the urge to slam his open palm down onto the counter. It's his fault, for avoiding the necessary conversation for so long, for trying to pull off a stunt like bringing Ben to the benefit before they had actually made his intentions clear. The promise of a plum networking opportunity had been the thinnest of pretenses. If he's being honest with himself, he had brought Ben to show him off, to see him be universally admired and then to know that *he* would be the one that Ben went home with at the end of the night.

Base selfishness disguised as consideration. Possessiveness masquerading as charity. In one

moment, the underpinnings of all his actions are revealed to him, and he isn't sure what to do, how to atone.

He draws in a ragged breath, suddenly needing to be away, outside, *anywhere* else but here, just steps away from where Ben is sleeping contentedly in George's bed. If he focuses, he can hear the sound of his low, even breathing through the bathroom door. He feels ill.

He goes for a run, one as long as he's ever taken. He wants to stay out until his mind quiets down satisfactorily, until he can win a moment of peace from the guilt that churns in his stomach like tar. But for that, he figures, he might have to run all the way to Albany.

Ben wakes up with his limbs still tangled in George's sheets. For a few long moments he doesn't move a muscle, just reacquainting himself with where he is, why he's here.

He groans into the pillow when the memories flood in: the glitter and glamor of the benefit, the predatory gleam in the eyes of Arnold's friends, the warmth of George's hand against Ben's side as he guided him into the waiting cab. And after, the first time he'd awoken in the dark.

A shiver cascades through him at that particular recollection. He still can't believe he'd asked for *that*, had been bold enough not only to want it but to tell George exactly *how* he wanted it. And the result...

He glances over his shoulder to see that George is gone from the bed. He has to fight down a rising wave of disappointment. It's not as though he had been looking for a repeat performance, not exactly. But he wouldn't exactly have been opposed either.

George's side of the bed is still warm, though. Still smells like him. So Ben flops over onto his back to stare at the ceiling, which is already streaked with golden reflections of dawn light off distant windows.

He still feels a little out of sorts. He has a headache, a stuffy nose, a scratchy throat, that slightly hungover feeling that lingers after any good long cry. And his clothes from the night before do not exactly make for the most comfortable pajamas. His fly is still undone, as are the bottom few buttons of his dress shirt. He needs a shower, and a change, and a cup of coffee. He hopes George comes back soon.

He's going to have to apologize for conduct the night before, and he wants to get that out of the way, along with any attendant explanation that's likely to be required of him (that part he most certainly is not looking forward to.) Sighing, he burrows deeper into the pillows. They'd never even gotten to have their conversation, the one that they'd been prevented from finishing in the coffee shop, but Ben isn't even sure that it's still necessary. Surely, it all went without saying? After what had happened, surely they have to be on the same page?

He drifts in and out of thoughts and semi-consciousness, lulled by the warmth and the mesmerizing patterns of dawn light on the ceiling. Then he hears the door to the apartment open and close with a bang.

In an instant George is within the room, red faced and sweaty from a jog and looking a little wild, almost crazed. He's carrying himself stiffly, and his knee is evidently bothering him a good deal. He meets Ben's eyes only for the briefest of moments before he shuts himself up in the bathroom, saying nothing.

Ben blinks, a feeling of cold dread creeping into his stomach. He hadn't thought that George would

be that mad at him for what had happened, not for forcing him to leave the event early and potentially embarrassing him in the process, or for everything that had followed. But perhaps he had underestimated the damage he had done?

He draws in a deep breath. Alright, he thinks. He can fix this. Whatever he's done wrong, he can apologize, he can make it up to him. He knows George isn't one for holding grudges. Frankly, he has other people he pays to do that for him. They can get past this.

The first step, Ben knows, is to get himself out of bed. It's a little presumptuous of him to laze around between George's sheets all morning as though he already belongs there. Ben pushes himself up to sitting with a grunt, already missing the warmth of the blankets.

He puts on the change of clothes he'd packed (wincing at the stickiness still clinging to the inside of his boxers) and goes into the kitchen. He needs something to do with his hands, so he rifles the vast cupboards for a coffee pot. He would make breakfast, but digging through George's fridge seems a little too intrusive. Does George even *buy* groceries? He's never seen the other man cook.

After a few minutes of half-frantic searching he does find the coffee machine. He has to go rummaging into the freezer for coffee beans, but he finds those too. The last of the pot has just finished dripping into the carafe when George steps out into the living room from the hallway.

His eyes dart around the space as though he's unsure if Ben will even still be there. But he doesn't seem entirely reassured to find that he in fact is.

"I made coffee," says Ben, unnecessarily. He pushes a mug towards George, who hesitates before picking it up.

"Thank you," he says quietly.

Ben uses the time it takes to take a sip from his own mug to gather up his courage.

"I thought that we should probably talk," he says. "Unless, do you have to go somewhere?"

He's only just noticed that George is quite visibly dressed for work: the crisp white shirt (no tie) and black jacket more or less what he wears every time Ben meets up with him on a Friday. Ben can admit he's a little perplexed. When George had indicated in his invitation that he wanted Ben to come prepared to stay the night, he had thought that they were going to have at least a portion of the following day to spend together. The fact that it's a Saturday only adds to his general confusion. But Ben will make the most of it. He has no choice.

"I don't," says George after an awkward pause. He's standing up so straight, carrying himself so carefully, as though bracing for an impact.

"I just wanted to apologize," Ben blurts out, "for what happened last night."

George's eyes snap to his like they're magnetized. He looks more than a little astonished.

"*You're* apologizing?"

The cocktail of dread and confusion roils around in Ben's gut.

"Uh, yes?"

George sets down his mug so hard that Ben is surprised the contents don't spill out all over the floor. The look on George's face is one he's never seen. His heart is beating too fast.

"If you want an explanation for why I -- well, why I freaked out, I can give you one," he says, too quickly. "It's just kind of a long story, and I don't want you to feel as though I'm dumping all this on you. But you have a right to know, I guess."

George waves him off.

"You don't have to talk about it," he insists. "You have nothing to be sorry for. God, Ben, I'm the one who..." he trails off, his voice wrecked.

"Who what?" asks Ben, confused.

And George just comes right out with it.

"I don't think you should see me any more."

After the initial shock, Ben is struck right away by George's choice of words. Not, *"I don't think we should see each other."* But an exhortation to Ben, specifically.

"I'm sorry?"

If George is going to try this, he thinks, Ben is going to make him spell it out. He's determined. He's not going to be left wondering.

"Ben, when we met, I didn't reach out to you because I wanted your friendship. That wasn't my intention."

Ben struggles to keep his features even, wishing that there were some way to will the blush from his cheeks.

"I know that," he says, sounding to his own ears more than a little petulant. But he doesn't care. "Or at least, I know that now. I figured it out. But we're friends now, aren't we?"

"Of course we are."

"Then I don't see what the problem is."

His voice is gaining strength and power now, as he settles into his conviction, into his resolution not to lose one of the best things in his life to something this *stupid*. But George is unmoving.

"You can't trust me, Ben. That's what I'm trying to tell you."

He sounds so defeated, so stricken, that Ben feels his own anger and frustration start to cool.

"That's not true."

"I took advantage of you," he says, and when Ben opens his mouth to object he just barrels on. "I did. It was entirely inappropriate, and I don't know what to do or say to properly apologize."

Ben sighs, his face contorted by confusion and frustration and disdain.

"No you didn't? I think I would remember if you had."

"I know it might have seemed that way, but you weren't yourself, weren't in any condition to make that decision. I should never have pressured you."

Ben sighs.

"I know you don't think I should trust you, or.. whatever. But trust me. You weren't taking advantage. I wanted it. I *want* it."

And to his very great surprise, George just...deflates.

"Are you sure?" he asks, all the strength leached from his voice.

"I've been waiting weeks to tell you. Months, really. I'm very sure."

George lets out a long, low breath.

"Alright."

The sparking tension in the room has defused, but Ben isn't sure where all to go from here. He wants to move in close, to comfort, to console, but the moment doesn't feel right. He wants to invite George to shed his stuffy work clothes and join him back in bed, but that doesn't feel right either. So instead he asks:

"Do you have any food here? I want to make you breakfast."

George laughs, just a little, and shows him where he keeps the eggs.

In the end, they do get the day to themselves.

Ben's attempt at breakfast is enough of a failure to prompt them to dash down to the bakery on the corner, and they return to George's apartment with coffee and too many pastries, and Ben gets powdered sugar on his cheek which George wipes off with a thumb and a small smile.

Other than such small, innocent touches, however, he keeps his distance. Ben understands. He's frankly more comfortable and more curious to feel out the boundaries of this brand new thing they've cut from the old cloth of their acquaintance, to see what's different, what's stayed the same.

George does indeed have a little work to get through, nothing he can't accomplish at home, so Ben takes the time to slowly, deliberately go through the entirety of George's home library.

A good bit of it, he can tell, is for show. Or...not *show*, precisely. Ben doubts that George would ever display a book for the purpose of impressing someone else. But the classical poetry, the Tolstoy and the Dostoyevsky, these Ben can tell he has never once opened.

There are gems, though. Books that Ben can tell George has returned to over and over again by the wear in their spines. There's an old school paperback of *Where the Red Fern Grows* that looks like it's getting ready to fall apart. A handful of lovingly dogeared Hardy Boys novels. A surprisingly large collection of books on the California Gold Rush that Ben makes a mental note to ask about.

Suddenly Ben knows what he wants to spend at least the next few hours doing. He picks something half at random from George's shelf of biographies (McCullough's *Truman*, as it happens, but that's hardly the point) and he goes into the living room, where George is just finishing up a call.

"Will you read to me?" Ben asks. George seems only mildly surprised by the request. But he takes the book, sits himself on the sofa, and allows Ben to settle in beside him.

It's dull. But Ben hardly cares about the words themselves, only their sounds, the way each syllable wells up low from George's throat, each consonant crisp and precise. He feels himself start to get swept away by that voice, maybe begin to doze off, when George stops.

He doesn't put the book down, merely nudges Ben so he's sitting longways on the sofa now. He stretches out so that his legs go over George's lap, and George's hand rests lightly on the curve of Ben's knee.

George reads almost until the sun goes down.

Chapter End Notes

Well there it is. Our Heroes are at last on the same page.

(Anyone who spots the sneaky West Wing reference in here gets a cookie from Mrs. Landingham)

Also: fun fact, George Knows Things about food and doesn't keep his eggs in the fridge. It's literally just germaphobic Americans who do that. Lafayette was very quick to instruct him in the proper way of doing things.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The next weekend George spends away on business, so they're prevented from seeing each other. Ben misses him, of course he does, but the way he misses him feels different than it used to: there's nothing anxious in it, nothing unsure. It's an ache, but one he can just barely register buzzing away off-stage in his mind, content to keep in the background, because it knows it will soon be satisfied.

George calls him at the end of the day, like clockwork. They say nothing remarkable to each other, just check in about their respective workdays and plans for the days following. George tells him how he's enjoying California (he's not) and Ben tells him about the antics of the students in his various classes, the progress of his advisees in speech and debate.

They don't discuss, outright, what had made Ben so upset at the benefit. He had talked himself out of his more irrational fears about George initiating their acquaintance after having, well, heard things about him from certain sources. Even if he has reason to believe that George was that sort of person (and he doesn't) it's a scenario that makes no logical sense. George freely gave the names of those of his colleagues with whom he considered himself friendly (Hank Knox, Nate Greene, and Fred Steuben, among a small number of others) and Arnold never made the list. Still, to be on the safe side, Ben carefully probes the nature and extent of George's continuing professional connection with Arnold, asking about who was in attendance at what meetings, or if George had any interesting water cooler gossip that might be making the rounds (George always has a paltry amount of this information, and Ben gently admonishes him that sometimes it pays to know such seemingly insignificant trivia.)

One evening, Ben comes home to a package from George. Not an unusual thing in and of itself. But when he opens it, it's only to find a postcard, a Balboa Island sweatshirt, and, from San Juan Capistrano....a snow globe. The incongruity of the tiny replica church ruins and the glitter of artificial snowflakes makes him laugh, and he grins like a loon for the rest of the night. He sleeps in the sweatshirt every night for a week.

A few days after George returns from his trip, Ben wakes up to a voicemail, saying that George is going to have a few meetings Friday afternoon and Saturday in, of all places, New Haven. And should he book a hotel, or might Ben want to help him find other accommodations? Ben has a sudden vision of George standing in his tiny kitchen or climbing out of his old full size bed, and instead of the wave of embarrassment he expects at the image, he *wants* it.

He texts back immediately: no, no a hotel definitely won't be necessary. He throws a flurry of logistical questions George's way, asking what time his train was getting in, or if he intended to drive, when his meetings were scheduled and how long he expected them to go. Meanwhile, his heart is already pounding.

Ben spends every spare second the next few days, when he is not at work, desperately cleaning his apartment. It's not as though his place is even that much of a mess, precisely. He knows he keeps his space a good deal tidier than most single guys his age (mostly so that he can pass Anna's periodic, unexpected, but entirely welcome inspections.) But it's such an old construction that it's almost impossible to get completely clean. There are too many cracks and corners, too many decades of accumulated dust in places he can't easily reach. He can't really do anything about the

scuffs in the linoleum floors, the mysterious footprint on the ceiling on his living room, or the streaks on the outside of his windows (though he does attempt some pretty dangerous acrobatics reaching for them with a windex-soaked paper towel, but eventually he has to just leave it alone.)

George's train gets in at the middle of the day, so Ben can't meet him, but he is there at the Blue State coffee when George gets out of his last meeting, looking unusually haggard. Frustrated. Ben asks him how his work went, and George admits to having sat down with a few geneticists from the Molecular Biology department, but he doesn't really want to go into detail and Ben doesn't push.

The rest of the day is supremely relaxed. Ben gives George a brief tour around the Green and downtown. They go for New Haven-style pizza and beer, and in a moment of triumph, Ben manages to snatch the check from the waiter before George can get to it (*his city, his treat*, he insists.) Then they go to Libby's and stand in the last of the late-summer lines for lemon and cherry Italian ice.

Their conversation peters off a little as they make their way back to Ben's place. Ben's butterflies haven't abated. It's not as though they've said all they have to say to each other, but Ben's suddenly wracked with doubt. What if the shabby little third-story walk-up is not what George is expecting? What if they lose their nerve?

They arrive at last at Ben's place on Park Street, and to mask his nervousness, Ben affects the closest he can get to a coy expression.

"Do you want to come up?" he asks.

George's eyes lock onto his and do not budge. Ben couldn't wrench his gaze away if he wanted to.

"Yes," he says.

Ben keys in the code for the door, thinks briefly about starting up the stairs, but changes his mind, turns on his heel.

George meets him halfway in a clumsy kiss that has their noses knocking together, Ben's lips brushing over George's chin before they make it to his mouth (still tasting of lemon, a hint of syrupy sweetness at the corners of his mouth that Ben wants to chase.) He stumbles, nearly loses his balance and falls backwards on to the stairs. Or he would have, but for George reaching out to grab his upper arm and steady him. They pull apart.

"We'll work on that," says George, and it sends a thrill up Ben's spine just to hear how breathless he sounds, just seeing the way his eyes darken. He feels impossibly emboldened.

"Upstairs," he gasps, and George vehemently agrees. They have to pause twice on the landings, when Ben's impatience gets the better of him, and each time it is George who pulls away, urges them to continue up the stairs. Ben doesn't know what's gotten into him; he feels like a humming live wire, stripped of restraint, of control.

His hands shake as he turns the key in the deadbolt. George stands behind him, so close, his hands skimming over Ben's sides.

And he'd had a plan, Ben thinks. He was going to offer him a drink, to take his jacket, to be, well, cooler about it. Smoother. But instead he's pressing George up against the door as soon as it clicks shut behind them, angling his head up, rising to his toes.

This kiss is better. It's practically perfect. George cups the back of his head, and he allows Ben a

few seconds of this frantic, half-crazed pace before he dexterously puts on the brakes, slows the kiss down, forces them to take their time with it. His tongue slides, slow and languorous, into Ben's mouth. He tightens his fingers in Ben's hair when he gasps into it, and brings his other hand to rest at the small of Ben's back, holding them flush together.

"Only as far as you want," George promises, when at last they have to break away for air.

Well, that shouldn't be a problem, he thinks. Because right now Ben wants everything.

"Okay," says Ben, before diving back into the kiss.

George pulls away again, too soon, before Ben has had his fill.

"What *do* you want?" he asks.

It's a difficult question, one Ben is not used to having to answer in detail. But he doesn't wring his hands, doesn't wallow in indecision. He lets the hand he has gripping George's shoulder slide down, over his chest, his stomach, to the evident bulge in his trousers.

"I'll leave the specifics up to you," he says, doing his best to sound sultry and probably not really succeeding. "But if we're keeping score, I think I owe you one."

It's the wrong thing to say. George grimaces, draws back a little.

"We're not...keeping score. I don't want you to think that I expect--"

Ben's heart does a nervous little flip, but he doesn't have to reach far to correct himself. His instincts, in this at least, are still good.

"That's not what I meant," he says softly, before pressing a chaste, fleeting kiss to the corner of George's mouth, who visibly relaxes. "I know we're not. It's okay. It's fine." He kneads at George again through the summer-weight wool of his slacks, and is rewarded with a low, ragged groan.

The situation mended, Ben draws them both away from the door. They kick off their shoes, leave them haphazardly lying about the hallway. Ben makes sure George doesn't trip over the loose floorboard in front of the entrance to the bathroom.

He goes to flick on the light in his bedroom, then thinks better of it. The thought of his room, clean but worn as it is, illuminated by the stark overheads, is not something he can stomach right now. If George asks him for the lights on, he'll comply, but he'd rather not risk even this minor embarrassment.

But George doesn't seem like he's likely to notice. He tugs gently at the hem of Ben's sweater until Ben obligingly lifts up his arms, then kisses him again once he's pulled it off and away. He traces his lips over the skin just above the collar of Ben's t-shirt, one warm hand slipping underneath the cotton to run over the muscles of Ben's back. Ben knows he's shaking badly, wonders if he isn't about to fly apart, but George's hand on his hip grounds him, and steadies him. When George ghosts his knuckles over Ben's belt buckle, everything suddenly feels too constricting, too stifling.

The look on George's face as Ben steps out of his jeans and pulls his t-shirt over his head is heavy, dark with desire. He makes Ben pause so he can get a good, long look at him in the dim yellow light that filters through the curtains from the streetlamps outside.

"Perfect," he breathes, and Ben shifts his weight from foot to foot, not uncomfortable, *per se*, but unsure precisely of how to handle the praise, which is evident in George's admiring expression

even more than it is in his words.

Silently, he urges Ben up on to the bed. Ben's about to ask him how he wants him before George guides him onto his back. He's kneeling beside Ben on the cheap Ikea mattress, one hand planted firmly on Ben's chest to keep him flat. He shushes Ben when he asks what he's doing, instead just bends forward to let his lips slide over Ben's neck.

The pace takes a sudden, wrenching shift out of the fast lane. George holds him down, firmly but not fiercely, to the bed, and, whispering a continuous stream of breathless praise (*how good, how beautiful, so so good for me*) as he kisses his way down Ben's torso. He pauses to suck a bruise into the soft skin above Ben's collarbone that Ben already knows he will gaze at in front of his mirror, will push his thumb into to savor the lingering ache. He scrapes his teeth over Ben's nipple and chuckles at the sound this produces. Ben just barely hears him mutter something under his breath about putting a pin in that little tidbit of information, and saving it for later.

George hasn't even shed his shirt, and Ben has to fight a sudden pang of anxiety at the thought, has to consciously remind himself that it's *fine* , that they're not keeping score, like George said. That there'll be plenty of time to make up for the deficit later.

Ben's loose-limbed, impossibly relaxed, by the time George hooks his thumbs into the waistband of Ben's boxers. He glances up at Ben's face, meets his eyes, waits for Ben's desperate nod and pleading look before proceeding.

Ben has to choke back a sob when George puts his lips to him, but he doesn't tease for long. The heat of his mouth is overwhelming, almost unsettling in how good it feels. He's grasping at the sheets, head thrown back, doesn't even realize how tense he is until George pulls off to exhort him gently to *relax, Ben. Easy*.

Ben does his best, he really does, but George is applying himself to his task assiduously, and Ben can only babble out an incoherent warning. He won't last, *can't* last, and it doesn't seem that George has any intention of making him last. He tries to tell him so, as best as he can, but George only responds by firming his grip on the crest of Ben's hip. His other hand reaches for Ben's own, twines their fingers together. It's too much.

George pulls away just in time for Ben to come all over his his stomach. A few drops glitter on George's chin, and Ben can't take his eyes off them.

He takes a moment to catch his breath, to steady himself, but even more pressing than the languor that follows his orgasm is the burning need to return the pleasure he's been given, to redouble it, to be *good* . He fumbles for George's fly, figuring the man can get his own shirt off if he wants to, but George is already ahead of him. His belt lands with a thump at the foot of the bed, and Ben surges upward, their hands somehow acting both in tandem and at cross-purposes as they combine their efforts to divest George of his clothes.

When that's done, and George is looming over him, his weight on his arms, Ben takes a moment to just gaze up at him, certain he must be wearing the most ridiculous expression. He feels entirely enveloped, surrounded in a way that ought perhaps to be uncomfortable, but instead feels only like safety, and security, and peace.

But that feeling only lasts until Ben flings out an arm to reach for the supplies he'd purchased, sheepishly, at the Walgreens down the street, before realizing that he'd left the whole bag in the bathroom. He could get up and retrieve it, but the thought of leaving the warmth of the bed, the circle of George's arms, is unbearable.

George seems to perceive their dilemma right away, but he is not fazed by it. And he doesn't seem to be in any mood to wait. Instead he reaches down to the juncture of Ben's thighs, smears the traces of his release still left on his hand over the soft skin there. Then he presses a hand to Ben's flank, gently urging his legs closed, and Ben understands his plan at once.

George thrusts into the slickened space between his thighs while Ben holds himself still, gives him as tight a channel as he can, their bodies situated so that Ben's face is pressed to the underside of George's jaw, the smell of George's aftershave surrounding him. He shifts, levers himself up and forward to trace his tongue across the angles of that neck, to savor the taste of salt, the rasp of stubble. This, evidently, catches George enough by surprise that he cries out, his thrusts stutter and stop, and Ben feels the warm rush of his release over his stomach.

He has the presence of mind to roll off of Ben before he's crushed beneath his weight, but he doesn't go far. They lie like that, tangled together, until their heart rates return to normal.

"That was--" mutters George.

"Yeah," finishes Ben.

"We should--" George tries, gesturing vaguely in the direction of the bathroom.

"Yeah," says Ben, before promptly falling asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Fourth, ya'll.

(also, for those who cared, the West Wing reference in the previous chapter was totally a trick question, a fairly vague permutation of Josh's line "President Bartlet...doesn't hold a grudge. That's what he pays me for." I've been told by Mrs. Landingham that you all get cookies anyway! Hooray!)

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It's a Saturday morning in the middle of November, and George is sitting at his desk.

The lights in the bullpen beyond his door are almost all switched off, hardly a soul is in. But the quiet is good. It helps him think, helps him focus.

And besides, he doesn't exactly want to advertise what it is he's working on, not after all the crap he's taken from his colleagues trying to get him to just *let it go, George, for godsake*.

His desk is spread with documents, print-outs of scientific manuscripts he can hardly understand, patent filings from their sources at the PTO. A set of security logs.

It's a mystery he should have solved already, he knows he should have. Whoever was responsible for the release of their data was lying low for now, either out of good instinct or because George hasn't been as discrete in his investigation as he'd thought. But either way, he has made no progress, and it's starting to grate.

The problem is, the notebooks and hard drives had all turned up again in the lab after a few days of being missing, and the principle investigators had all just concluded that it was just a case of misplaced books. The team, they eventually decided, must have just gotten scooped as the result of an indiscrete presentation at a conference that had simply given away too many details. It happened all the time, they insisted. They had said a little too much, they hadn't moved quite fast enough to publish, were too slow on the draw in filing for their own provisional patent. An occupational hazard. After all, there had never been any intention of making any money from the project anyway, so why did it matter?

But George knows. He knows it *does* matter. And he doesn't believe for a second that the convenient disappearance of Sackett's data was a coincidence, or the product of absent mindedness (though the good doctor could be a little addled at times.) There's more going on here, he knows there is. He just can't figure out what.

Continental is fundamentally vulnerable, George has known that for a long time. But acquiring a greater level of independence isn't really in the cards. George has done as much as he can to preserve his own autonomy, but sometimes the thought of just cutting ties and running for the hills has its appeal.

He's interrupted in his reverie by a knock on the door.

"Henry," he says, looking up from his desk. "I didn't expect to see you in today."

"I'm not. Not officially," says Knox, his voice retaining some of its usual booming quality even when it's just the two of them here. "I just dropped by to pick up a few things, and to see what your plans were for the holiday weekend?"

Right. Thanksgiving. He might have forgotten all about it, if it weren't for the fact that he was already lamenting the loss of a weekend with Ben, who would probably be spending the time with his family on Long Island. But he had made no thought as to how to spend the time himself. Most likely he would just be working. Which was...fine.

"I hadn't thought about it."

Knox is smart enough not to let his expression look obviously pitying, but they've known each other for too long for George not to know exactly what he's thinking.

"If you want," Knox says, "Lucy and I would love to have you over."

"I appreciate it, Henry. But I think I'll sit this one out."

Knox wants to press, George is sure he does. But he knows better.

"Suit yourself. But please don't spend your whole holiday weekend with this bullshit. It'll make you crazy."

"I won't," he says, placatingly. But his expression says *no promises*.

"Take care of yourself George," says Knox, and George waves him away.

It does make a pretty pathetic picture, now that he thinks of it. George is not often bothered by the fact that he doesn't spend the holidays with his family like a normal person. But it feels different now, somehow, with Ben in his life.

He sighs, leans back in his chair. There are upsides, he's found. To the distance. Or at least, there are things that make it easier to bear. They've found that they really prefer good old-fashioned phone sex to most of the other kinds of intimacy that the modern age makes possible, for all the days they have to spend apart. Of course he'd had the very great pleasure of watching Ben get himself off through the little camera on his laptop, while he listened to George give him the occasional direction or two. Still, being able to see, but not touch, had left George almost more frustrated and restless than satisfied.

It would be wrong to say that his doubts had disappeared entirely. Every so often a wave of apprehension, of dread, overcame him. The fear that he's making a grave mistake. Sometimes he feels overwhelmed by the scope and strength of Ben's affection, the degree to which Ben trusts him.. It's as heavy a responsibility as he's ever carried, and some days he feels as though he could never be equal to it. Other days, it feels like the only thing that sustains him. And that, in itself, is a terrifying prospect. He's not sure when he became so entangled in this, so invested. The protective instincts Ben kindles in him haven't been sparked by any other partner, and he still isn't certain how to navigate that minefield.

What this all boils down to is that any time lost, that they might have spent together, George regrets intensely. So, even though he knows he's being unreasonable and would never dare bring it up, the thought of Ben presumably spending the weekend with his parents and siblings still leaves a bad taste in his mouth.

Presumably.

He realizes his mistake at once. George has made a lot of presumptions about Ben that have turned out not to be true. And how stupid would it be to miss an opportunity just because he failed to actually ask what his plans were?

So he picks up the phone.

When Ben answers, it sounds like he's in the middle of a crowd, and George recalls that he's meant to be at a speech and debate tournament this weekend.

"Is this a bad time?" he asks.

"Oh no," Ben insists, his voice raised over the noise of the room, "I may only have a few minutes though. What's up?"

"I won't keep you long," George insists. "But I was just thinking, you hadn't mentioned having plans for the holiday."

"I actually don't have any," Ben admits, and George can all but hear his sheepish expression over the phone. "Normally I'd do something with my friends, but they're all kind of scattered to the winds this year."

George hums his acknowledgement, the gears of his mind already whirring with plans.

"What about you?" Ben asks, doing his best to sound casual.

"I don't have any either," says George. "But I can make some, if you're up to it."

Ben exhales, and George can hear him shift the phone around, the background noise fading a little as he steps to somewhere less packed with people.

"I'd like that," Ben says, quietly. George smiles to himself.

"Okay."

There is a pause that hangs heavy between them, before George speaks up again.

"Well I'll let you get back to what you were doing."

"Okay," says Ben. But they linger on the line for a few beats, not yet ready to hang up, before Ben mutters a "gotta go" and ends the call.

And George gets to work.

"Who was that?" asks Nate, who pops up at Ben's shoulder just as he's putting down his phone.

Ben doesn't jump, but only because Nate has made a habit of this since they were in school together and he's used to it.

"No one," he says, too quickly.

"Was it Book Boy?" asks Nate.

"What?"

"The guy. With the books," says Nate slowly, as though he were talking to a student.

"Oh. Uh, yeah. It was him."

Nate waggles his eyebrows.

"How is that going, then?"

"Fine," Ben insists. "It's going fine."

"Yeah?"

"Hey," says Ben, gesturing back towards the judges' table, "I want to grab these numbers before--"

"Because you haven't really talked about it, so I just want to make sure."

"It's fine, Nate. I promise."

"And it's just that the last time something like this--"

"It's not the same," Ben cuts in. "It's good, I promise. It's going...really well."

"I mean okay, Sunshine, if you're sure. But do you want to talk about it?" Nate asks.

And Ben is kind of thrown off-balance by the fact that he *does* want to talk about it, that he's been wanting to tell someone about George for weeks, but his old instincts toward secrecy had kept him from saying a word.

"Not now," Ben says. "After."

Nate grins, punches Ben's shoulder affectionately, and walks off to get them their results. Ben takes a moment, staring at the blank screen of his phone, and thinks.

They'd never really taken any trips together before, content with the comforts of George's apartment or his own. This would be their first weekend away as....a couple? Ben rolls the word around in his head for a minute, not sure he likes the sound of it, but quite sure he likes the *idea*. They haven't had a lot of conversation on the topic of exclusivity, or lack thereof. There was no question about it in Ben's mind; he couldn't imagine having a need that George could not satisfy.

*And what if he has needs **you** can't satisfy?* asks a cold, insistent voice at the back of his mind. *If you're not enough for him? What will you do?*

Ben shakes his head. George's attention was so focused, so comprehensive. He called Ben so often, and he worked so hard. Surely if he wanted something else, there wouldn't even have been *time*?

They would talk soon, he reassures himself. There would be time. Ben would make sure he put it to good use.

George picks him up at home. He'd offered to take the train into the city, so that they could both just go from there, but George had insisted that it wasn't too far out of his way. They hit the road early, taking winding country lanes to avoid the holiday traffic.

The drive is long, and mostly silent. Ben fiddles with the radio, gets a kick out of the faces George pulls when a song comes on that's not to his taste. But mostly they're just lulled by the gentle up-and-down of the road, the passing of the scenery outside, which is bleak, but still beautiful in a stark, slightly forbidding way.

Five hours later, they pull up the drive of the hotel. It's a nice place, remote, a few miles from Skaneateles. This late in the season, there are hardly any tourists around. The place is practically empty. So much the better.

The sprawling gardens in the center of the complex look like they would be magnificent in summertime, but in late November it's a different picture. George gets them checked in, and they take themselves up to their room.

The massive wrought-iron bed dominates the space. Out their window they have a view of the

dormant garden. There's a fireplace, which George hastens to light in order to dispel the slight draft coming through the patio doors. It's not exactly either of their styles, the whole thing done up to look a bit like a southern French chateau. Ben wonders if George's assistant made the recommendation. It's all exposed beams and golden plaster walls. The bed spread is a pattern of blue and yellow flowers. But it's quiet, and cozy. Just what they wanted.

When they return after eating dinner in the almost-empty dining room, George asks if there are any Thanksgiving traditions that Ben absolutely can't do without.

Ben flashes back to his parents' 1970s split-level home on Long Island. His mom's kitschy Cracker Barrel-style decor on the walls. His brothers, boisterously fighting for space on the couch while the football game plays. His dad, leading Sam and Will's kids in a game of Uno at the kitchen table.

"The Cowboys game," he says, after minute lost in memories. "Maybe we can put that on?"

George says that sounds good to him.

They turn on the TV and settle in on the bed to watch. About halfway through the first quarter, George remembers the bottle of Angel's Envy he had packed on a whim, and they start in on it together.

By halftime, they've probably had a little too much. Or a lot too much. But George's mood, always always sour around the holidays, has lightened considerably with all the profanity Ben's been hurling at the ref, and that has probably freed up his pours. George has no feelings whatsoever about the two teams playing, but Ben is cheering against the Cowboys so energetically that it's hard not to be drawn in.

"I wouldn't have thought you were a Redskins fan," George quips. Ben shrugs.

"I'm not. It's just what me and my brothers have always done. Root for whoever is playing against Dallas. I honestly couldn't even tell you why."

The game cuts for halftime, and Ben flops back against the pillows, having worn himself out.

It occurs to Ben that they may very well have had too much to get up to anything tonight. But Ben doesn't mind. He's warm from the fire and George's borrowed sweater, and pleasantly drunk, and he's having a good time cataloging all of the subtle ways in which George is affected by the booze. His smile is looser, more easy. His posture relaxed. And his kisses, as Ben soon finds, are a good deal messier.

Soon they're making out on the bed like teenagers, Ben's hand sliding up under George's shirt, while ESPN drones on in the background. George takes Ben's lower lip between his teeth, tugs *just* hard enough to elicit a moan, a roll of Ben's hips. He laughs, and pulls away.

The whiskey also, it would seem, makes him chattier.

"I never explained," he says after a while, "why I don't go back to Virginia for the holidays."

Ben frowns. He never would have expected an explanation, honestly. He doesn't expect one now. But if George sees fit to give him one, he'll listen.

"The way that I identify myself hasn't always been such an open secret," he begins, and it takes Ben a moment to figure out just what he means. He's never really thought about George in terms of *out* or not. The idea that George might have been cowed by anyone into secrecy had just seemed absurd, but Ben also seriously doubted George had much of an affinity for identity politics. And it

certainly wouldn't have been in his best interest to advertise his preferences for the whole world to gawk over. But if he registers Ben's fleeting confusion, it doesn't stop George from pressing on.

"Certainly, anyone at Continental who cares to know has since been told, and I've not dodged those kinds of questions when they're asked of me."

Ben knows. He's read those interviews, many of which are from nearly a decade ago, and they'd filled him with such a surge of pride and admiration that he won't soon forget them.

"But," George continues, "when I made the decision, it was... Well. My mother and I have never much gotten along, and I think that was the last straw for her. I still keep in touch with my brothers, though we don't see much of each other. But she and I haven't spoken since."

Ben lets out a long, low breath, his heart positively breaking. He doesn't say anything, knows he doesn't have words adequate to the moment, but just lets his head fall against George's shoulder. Lets it rest there.

It was nothing like that for Ben, not really. But he doesn't know how to tell his own story, how to tell how, when his parents found out about him, his mother had cried and his father had gone stoney-faced and all but fled the scene. But then they had come back, and said that while they couldn't pretend they weren't upset, they promised that they would try their best. That he was welcome in their home, always. That he was loved, always.

No, that hadn't been what had driven him away. Whatever damage had been done, he'd done himself.

Time to come clean, Ben thinks.

"Your reasons are a lot better than mine," he says, without turning to face him. "I could go back any time I want to."

"Then why don't you?" asks George, coaxing Ben as gently as he can into an answer.

And Ben's never asked himself the question quite that way, never forced himself to confront it the way he's confronting it now. But the truth comes to him in that moment like lightning out of a clear sky.

"Embarrassment," he says. "I -- I screwed up, in kind of a big way, with a relationship I was in after college. It probably wasn't the best -- that is, there were a lot of issues with it, and I didn't really handle them well. But it kind of freaked my family out, and I didn't help the situation and it was basically a big mess that I never really tried to resolve."

George doesn't respond, but gives Ben space to say the rest of what he needs to say, drawing him out more effectively with silence than he could with any encouraging words. Ben takes a deep breath.

"I didn't want to tell you before," Ben says, carefully, "because I didn't want to cause any trouble. But it was Arnold. That's who I was with."

George hesitates, clearly not relishing what he has to say next.

"I know."

Ben draws back, nearly falls off the edge of the bed as a sudden rush of the old icy panic overtakes him.

"You do? How?" he asks, his voice cracking on the last word.

"I guessed," says George, making no attempt to close the distance between them again, but letting Ben have his space. "At the wedding. It was pretty obvious why they had invited you. It didn't feel appropriate to say anything at the time."

"You never heard anything? From him? Before the wedding?" Ben asks in a rush.

"About you?" says George. "No, no of course not. We don't even work together anymore, as I said. He was at Mt. Vernon for a while, but he got shuffled off to another division."

"Why?"

"He got caught up in a bit of an embezzlement scandal. The investigation never found anything concrete enough to justify dismissing him outright. And he was a talented operations officer. His teams always performed very well, there were a lot of people who wouldn't have wanted to see him go. But he did come off looking a bit worse for wear. There was no way he could stay where he was."

"When was this?" asks Ben.

"Some two and a half years ago," says George, and Ben lets out a long, low breath, a great many old questions and unpleasant memories falling into place on the scaffold of this new knowledge.

"That explains a lot," he says, a little bitterly.

George frowns, shifts a little, like he wants to move towards Ben, draw him in. But then he thinks better of it.

"Yes," he says, very quietly. "I imagine it might."

Ben rolls over onto his back, suddenly no longer in the mood for talking, or kissing, or football, or much of anything. He shuts his eyes, wraps the edge of the blanket around himself. And George lets him pretend to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

In case you wanted to get a better idea of what the hotel looks like: mirbeau.com

The Tallmadge family in this AU is a little more complicated than show canon, but mostly aligns with the historical. Which is to say, Ben had four brothers, not just one: William, Samuel, John, and Isaac, with Ben smack dab in the middle. Will and Sam are already married with kids, at this point in the narrative. A large sprawling Tallmadge clan suited my purposes for later stories, so that's what ya'll are gonna get.

Also, while Angel's Envy sounds like a brand of lotion you'd buy at Victoria's Secret, it's actually a super great brand of bourbon that I'd highly recommend to all of you if you can get your hands on some.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE MOVING ON TO THE CHAPTER

Ok, most of you have already guessed what's coming, so I'm not terribly concerned about spoilers here. While this chapter does not contain explicit violence or sexual assault, it does depict a relationship that progresses from good to....very not good in a way that may very well hit too close to home for some people. And the reason why I know this is that it almost hit too close to home for me. **It's your responsibility as a reader to determine whether or not that's going to be something you can handle.** If you're unsure, and want more details about specific potential triggers, contact me on tumblr (off anon) and I will be happy to tell you anything you might wish to know. Take care of yourself.

July, 2013

There are a lot of things Ben likes about living in New Haven, but there's nothing he loves more than the way the city looks from the top of East Rock Park in the early morning.

When he has the time, and doesn't have to worry about being anywhere until late in the morning, he jogs all the way from his apartment, through the intervening neighborhoods and up the hill. He always comes home from these runs sore and exhausted, but it's worth it. He needs the distraction.

It's been two months since graduation, and Ben is already feeling antsy. Everyone he knew, by now, has jetted off to some fantastic opportunity or another, whether that be a dream job or a year's worth of traveling on their parents' dime. Ben's just...here. Slogging through the extra courses at UNH that he needs for his teaching certification. Waiting tables. Waiting, generally.

He's never really known what it's like to just spin his wheels, but there's no doubt in his mind that that's exactly what he's doing. So he tries to take his mind off things.

He plays video games. He goes out on the Sound with Caleb in his boat, and lets the rocking of the waves lull his mind into blankness. He runs.

Now he's looking down onto the tidy, tree-lined streets of the old bungalows and well-preserved mansions that stand between East Rock and the handful of skyscrapers that make up downtown. He can see the outline of the bell tower in the center of campus, which he used to walk past every day without ever really taking the time to notice how beautiful it was.

He admires the vista now, standing at the crest of the hill, still panting from the effort of his run.

He drags a hand through the mess of his hair and then lets it fall to his side. The humidity is weighing on him, the day already too warm, even with the sun just peering over the horizon. But it's...nice. He thinks he could stay here for a while.

That is, he could, until something collides with his left side and nearly sends him sprawling into the dirt of the trail. But for the hand that reaches out, wraps around Ben's forearm and pulls him upright, he would be on his ass in the middle of the footpath. They both speak at once.

"Beg your pardon," says a low voice.

"I'm so sorry," Ben says, half-reflexively. But then, he had been standing smack-dab in the middle of the trail. He hadn't thought to encounter anyone else all the way up here so early in the morning.

"No, no, I should have watched where I was going," says the man. He's standing between Ben and the sun, and it's making it hard for Ben to properly make out his face. But he's certainly tall, Ben notices at once. Imposing. He reaches out a hand, this time not to save Ben from falling, but in greeting. It seems like a weird gesture to accept from someone who just nearly ran him over, but of course he does.

"To whom do I owe my apology?" says the stranger, and Ben realizes he's asking for his name. Ben gives it.

Gradually, Ben's eyes adjust to the harsh angle of the light, and he can just begin to make out the contours of a handsome face, the flash of a bright-white smile. The man, Ben notices, hasn't let go of his hand yet.

Fifteen minutes and one thrilling and engaging conversation later, Ben descends from the hilltop, butterflies still fluttering in his stomach, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth that he can't will away no matter how hard he tries. There's a new number keyed into his phone, and a name to go with it.

Arnold, Benedict.

Things happen fast. The first night, Arnold takes him out to a place Ben's always wanted to try but could never have afforded on his own. They talk, and Ben drinks perhaps a drop too much, but Arnold walks him back to his apartment and leaves him at the door with a quick, almost-chaste kiss that still manages to leave Ben breathless.

The second night is different.

Arnold pushes Ben up against the wall of his front hallway, sucking a bruise into his neck and slipping a hand in to the back pocket of Ben's jeans. Ben feels like he's been set on fire, like he's in someone else's body: his own has scarcely ever managed to make him feel this way. Arnold directs him into the bedroom, and flicks on the lights.

It's nothing like the fumbling, fleeting explorations he'd shared with Nate, nothing like the awkward, awful kisses he'd exchanged with the handful of unfortunate girls he'd dated in high school. Arnold doesn't hesitate, doesn't second-guess himself, doesn't even give Ben the space to feel ill-at-ease or unprepared.

He moves like a force of nature: Ben feels like he's caught in a riptide, but it's good. It is. He doesn't have to think, doesn't have to worry, doesn't have to decide. He's just along for the ride.

He urges Ben to undress in the bright light of the bedroom, and doesn't comment on the way Ben's

hands are shaking, which Ben is immeasurably grateful for. He just has to hope it isn't obvious that he's never done this before. Arnold doesn't say a word about it, but there's a glint in his eyes, a twist to his lips, that speaks to some secret knowledge he doesn't bother to articulate. He runs his hands up and down Ben's bare sides with astonishing gentleness, smiles at the way it makes Ben shiver.

He hasn't really stopped talking either, though his running commentary is a little less than eloquent. Ben just figures that's how it goes.

"Jesus, look at you," Arnold says, voice warm and rough-edged. "Such a tease, such a *fucking* tease. Do you even know what you've been doing to me all night?"

Ben swallows, casting around for an answer to that, but he has none. Arnold, thankfully, doesn't seem to mind.

He gets Ben on his back in the center of the bed, in nothing but his boxers and undershirt. Spends a few minutes peppering him with kisses, leaving bites and sucking bruises into his skin (some of which, Ben knows, will require long sleeves and high-buttoned collars to conceal from his classmates and coworkers, but he doesn't protest, tries to appreciate them anyway.)

Then, when Arnold decides he's ready to move on to other pursuits, he rolls Ben over onto his front, draws him up by the hips so that he's on elbows and knees. Ben tries to just breathe, deep and even. Tries to focus on the half-familiar feeling of Arnold's hand running over his back, and not the entirely unfamiliar sensations happening elsewhere. He hones in on the sound of Arnold's voice, which fades in and out of his awareness.

"Fuck, you were made for this, Ben. Made for me. I can already tell. God, you want this so bad, don't you? Such a perfect fucking *slut* ."

He says it all, not ungently or unkindly, with a tone of almost incongruous affection that Ben latches on to, that he uses to brush aside the way his skin prickles unpleasantly at *made for this* and *pretty whore* and *mine* . He knows Arnold doesn't actually mean these things, knows it's just what people say in the heat of the moment, but it will take some getting used to.

Arnold gives him more guidance: how to spread his legs and arch his back and bear down when he ought to. And Ben does as he's asked, because it's easier than sorting out what he wants for himself, easier than stumbling blind through the minefield of his own desires. And he can make Arnold's desires his own, he thinks. It can't be that hard. So he breathes, lets his mind go quiet, relaxes into it. And does what he's told.

After it's done, Arnold does pull him in close, holds Ben for a little while, whispering occasional half-haphazard praise into Ben's ear. But before Ben can properly drift off to sleep as he so desperately wants to do, Arnold rises from the bed to shower and change.

Suddenly unsure that he can take the notion for granted, Ben asks if it's alright he stay the night. Arnold frowns.

"That's fine," he says, "I have to take off early in the morning, but you're welcome to stay."

He returns to bed after his shower, but keeps to his side of the mattress so that there's a good foot of open space between them. Ben tries desperately not to toss and turn too much, tries to get comfortable, but it takes a long time to find a position that works and doesn't aggravate all the new aches in his body that he's never encountered before. He's freezing too, wants to curl up against Arnold's broad back, but he doesn't want to overstep. Eventually, finally, he nods off.

Arnold, he soon finds, is a fury of almost-ferocious energy. He never sits still, can never stand to let a silence lengthen. It doesn't take much effort on Ben's part to be with him: he always has a plan, always has a topic on his mind. It's not as though Ben can't get a word in edgewise when he wants to, but he doesn't mind listening to Arnold talk, and he never seems to run out of things to say.

They make quite a contrasting pair. Ben has never really considered himself small (slight, yes, but his height had always made up for it) but Arnold is nothing if not physically impressive. Ben had thought when they met that he looked like his presence could fill any room he walked into, and he's proven right time and again. He sees the way that people's eyes are drawn to Arnold, the way they defer to him. No one has ever deferred to Ben in his life. Having all that charm, all that boisterous energy and desire directed at him can be a little overwhelming.

And he does desire Ben. Makes no secret of it. There's nothing of the hand-waving or game-playing that had dogged him in college, nothing tentative or coy. He's nothing like Nate, laughing off his own desires, lest, heaven forbid, the situation become anything approaching *serious*. He is always, always in earnest.

When things start to shift, it's so gradual that Ben scarcely notices.

They start to see less of each other, as summer lengthens into fall, Arnold insisting that the situation at his work (which he does not explain to Ben, he says, for fear of boring him) is consuming more and more of his time. Ben eases up, doesn't push too hard or insist on anything.

The sex changes. At first Ben can't pinpoint exactly how. But just as soon as Ben gets used to something new (*Arnold's cock in his mouth, Arnold's cum on his face, Arnold's hand on his throat*) things change again, and there's something different to be assimilated into Ben's repertoire of experience. At first Ben is inwardly pleased by the fact that Arnold feels he can take a little more, take it a little harder. Ben has no wish to be coddled, or underestimated. He's sure he will get the hang of it soon. He has to.

The first time Arnold stands him up is after what Ben knows has been a particularly long and difficult week. Ben takes it upon himself to make the reservations, arrange everything in a way he hopes will suit. He wants give Arnold a break for once, let Ben take care of him for once. But even though Ben had checked in with him in the middle of the day to confirm the time and place, Arnold never shows. He doesn't respond to Ben's texts, doesn't pick up the phone when Ben calls, and he's ready to be genuinely worried that something awful has happened when Arnold finally gets back to him, apologizing profusely and insisting that he just got caught up in an urgent situation at the office.

It's a fluke. Ben is positive. A one-time thing. For weeks afterward Arnold is his usual self -- bold, tempestuous, affectionate, gentlemanly. But then he flakes on another date. And then again.

The first time Arnold's card is declined at a bar, Ben can tell something more serious is going on. The "conversation" that Arnold has with the manager (if a conversation it could even be called) involves a lot of shouting and profanity, and it takes all of Ben's power of will to keep his seat and not just flee the pitying looks the other patrons shoot him. After that, they rarely go out, ostensibly because Arnold's time is now so limited. Ben meets him at his apartment, and sometimes they eat, or put something on the huge flatscreen in Arnold's living room. But they always fuck, and Ben falls out of the habit of asking to stay over, preferring instead to drive back to his own place, fall asleep alone in the cold comfort of his own bed.

But even with the cracks that begin to appear in their foundations, Ben is glad, still swept away in the tide of his feelings, of his genuine admiration and respect for this man who, talented and

accomplished and ambitious as he is, wants Ben to be a part of his life. Ben feels a little drunk on it sometimes.

But the cracks don't mend. They only grow, and spread.

He starts to spend less time with Caleb and Anna, partly as a result of the new demands on his time, but also because he's making an effort to keep his schedule open, in order to accommodate Arnold's often unpredictable and erratic work hours.

When Nate returns from his months-long sojourn in South America, he convinces Arnold to come out with them for the night, to celebrate his safe return and here his endless litany of stories. It's a good night, one of the better ones Ben's had in awhile, and he's still riding that wave when Arnold takes him home.

A few hours later, when Arnold is tracing lazy patterns into the skin of Ben's back, he speaks.

"That guy Hale," he says, "does he have a thing for you?"

Ben blinks, pushes himself up on to his elbows.

"No. What makes you think that?"

But Arnold is not so easily persuaded.

" *Did* he have a thing for you, then?"

Ben says nothing, but the flush that comes into his cheeks is probably more than enough to give him away.

"I'm not mad," he insists. "Of course I'm not. I just have a sense for these things." And Ben figures it's useless to try and deceive him.

"We -- we might have hooked up once or twice in school. But it was nothing. And it was years ago."

Arnold hums his acknowledgment, says nothing for a little while.

"I'm not saying I don't trust you," he says eventually. "But I know people. And I don't think he's as over you as you think."

And Ben wants to tell him he's being preposterous, that Nate's always just considered him a friend, that anyway it was all too far in the past to matter.

But after that, he ends up refusing a lot more of Nate's invitations, leaving engagements a little sooner than he might have done, taking a little longer to reply to his texts and his voicemails. He doesn't know why he senses that it's better to deal out these little disappointments than to confront the issue head on, doesn't know why he even shies away from the *thought* of doing so. But he does.

The fall rolls on. His family finds out, somehow, probably through Anna or an indiscreet word from Caleb, and he has to deal with more than one mortifying conversation with his mother, asking about his "gentleman friend" and would Ben like to invite him to Thanksgiving dinner? The thought alone makes his stomach churn. He knows she means well, he does, but he can't do it. He can't handle her goodwill, or his father's stoic acceptance, or his brothers' well-meaning teasing about how "Junior found himself a *boyfriend*."

So he spends the holiday sullen and nervous and even though after twenty-three years of putting up with his family he has mostly learned to endure their playful ribbing with good grace, there's an iciness in his veins that doesn't go away, that makes Ben want nothing more than to have the spotlight turned from him, to leave, to flee.

But it's not until December that things properly fall apart.

Ben is washing his face in Arnold's bathroom, when he notices something strange: three or four long blonde hairs twined around each other in the basin of the sink. And once he thinks to start looking, there's more traces to be found in the same vein: a lone bobby pin forgotten on the nightstand, a half-empty cup of coffee on the counter that Ben doesn't remember seeing Arnold drink. The fleeting traces of a woman's perfume lingering on the pillowcase.

And Ben's not an idiot.

He doesn't take the time to think it through: limbs thrumming with anger, all the bottled up confusion and distress of the past few months boiling over with this new revelation.

The fight that follows is short, but terrible. *Did Arnold think he was stupid? That he wouldn't notice? How long had this been happening?*

His denial is instantaneous, unequivocal. Ben didn't see what he thought he saw, he insists. He's jumping to conclusions, irrational, not thinking clearly. But Ben doesn't back down, and soon they're both giving as good as they get. Distantly, dimly, as though he's looking through someone else's eyes, Ben sees Arnold raise his hand.

He doesn't sleep that night, alone in his own place, dabbing occasionally at the blood that seeps from his split lip. He wonders who he should call, who he wants to talk to. Surely he could call *somebody*? But he doesn't.

When he finally stirs himself after a fitful night of restless wakefulness, there's a voicemail waiting for him. It's nothing more than a haphazard collection of cliches ("*misunderstanding*" "*fundamental differences*" "*not going to work out*") but for all that the phrases themselves are garbled, the message comes through loud and clear. It's finished.

Ben goes back to bed.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12

November, 2016

Ben wakes up the next morning with as bad of a hangover as he's had in a long time.

Shockingly, even though the sun is evidently well over the horizon, George is still abed, his face angled away from the light peering through the curtains and buried in the pillow.

Ben takes a little time to just watch him sleep, enjoying the moment despite relentless pounding in his head. He isn't sure whether or not he is supposed to still be angry with George after learning what he learned the night before, that George was aware, at least tangentially, that he and Arnold had been together. But after sleeping on it, it doesn't seem like such a serious offense. Of course he had never brought it up, Ben thinks. He simply had the decency not to broach what was probably never going to be anything less than a supremely delicate subject. It's not worth his being angry, especially now that the initial shock has passed.

Still, Ben thinks, better not to raise the topic again, if he can help it. It was one thing for George to know they'd been together, but another thing entirely for him to understand all that had entailed. And even if George's relationship with Arnold as it is now is nothing but distantly professional, hardly cordial even, Ben doesn't want to make waves. There is no telling how George might react to some of the stories Ben has.

Actually, no. Ben *can* predict how he would react. And both options are equally terrible. Either George would be absolutely infuriated on Ben's behalf, might even be driven to do something rash, something that could get him into a world of trouble. Or...he wouldn't be. He would brush Ben off, insist that things could not have possibly proceeded the way Ben thinks they did. That he knew Arnold, and knew him to be a good man.

Ben shudders. No, that would be absolutely unendurable. Far far better to keep his mouth shut.

To apologize for his sullenness the night before, Ben casts around for a possible peace offering. He rises from bed, still dressed in his clothes from the night before. A shower and a shave and a change are all in order, he thinks. But first, coffee.

He accepts two cups from a waitress in the restaurant downstairs, ignoring her look of sympathy (surely he can't look *that* bad) and then returns to the room.

He's rather hoping to find George still asleep, but instead he's fresh out of the shower, downing a glass of water. He looks even worse than Ben feels: damp hair sticking up in all directions, eyes red-rimmed and a little glazed over. Ben would find it a little funny if he wasn't so inclined to be sympathetic. He rifles around in his bag for the bottle of Excedrin he keeps on hand for all such emergencies and shakes out two pills for George. He scoffs at Ben's offering at first, but Ben honestly figured he would be the kind of stubborn asshole to refuse painkillers of every kind. So he persists.

"Take them," he chides. "You'll be glad you did."

Sullenly, George snatches the pills from Ben's palm and swallows them dry, with a sour look. Ben stifles a grin.

A shower does wonders for Ben's own hangover, but he's still not feeling great when he steps out, George sitting on the bed and rapidly typing out an e-mail on his phone, already fully dressed and thoroughly put-together again; the only trace of his lingering distress the slight pallor of his cheeks, the bags under his eyes. And really, all Ben actually wants to do is go back to bed, hopefully beside George, and nap the day and his headache away. But it's unseasonably mild outside, and George insists they shouldn't waste it.

They go for a drive around the lake, the cool air on their faces a further tonic to their jangling nerves, and stop in a diner in a tiny village on the far shore for a greasy breakfast that also works wonders. They troop around a little trail that snakes through a maze of old rail bridges and abandoned water mills, which is more than enough to engage Ben's interest and manages to keep them occupied for a few hours more.

Still, when they get back to the room mid-afternoon, the bed is singing a siren song to the both of them. Ben doubts George will be willing to indulge him in this, but to his great surprise, he does. And they lie down together on the mattress; George, lying on his side, lets Ben drape himself over his back. He takes Ben's wrist in a loose grip, and, holding Ben's hand to his chest, they drift off, content.

But by Saturday morning, there's a shift. Ben wakes up to see George gazing at him unabashedly from across the bed, his eyes half-hooded, intent.

"Good morning," Ben mumbles, a pleasant warmth already pooling in his stomach at the steadiness and focus of that look. He wonders what it portends, but doesn't want to ask outright. If George has plans, Ben would rather see how they play out.

"How did you sleep?" George asks.

"Great," Ben says, stretching his arms above his head. "Really great."

Most of the day that follows is honestly a blur in Ben's memory, all the prosaic details overlaid with the steadily mounting drumbeat of carefully-cultivated desire that George deliberately stirs in him, and refuses to satisfy.

It's cold again today, so they bundle up and spend some time wandering around the little town. It's almost...too picturesque for Ben's taste, the presence of the astonishing levels of wealth among the residents painfully evident even just in the way all the old buildings are so carefully restored, as well as in the Talbot's and French country decor shops and designer yarn boutiques that line the main thoroughfare, which bespeak a community fundamentally walled off from the rest of the world. It makes Ben uncomfortable, honestly; and the way it calls attention to the way he's grown so strangely accustomed to the trappings of money doesn't help at all.

But he's mostly able to bury these unpleasant thoughts under the sheer weight of George's solicitous attention: the way he brushes his knuckles against Ben's waist when he steps around him in the aisle of the bookstore where they loiter for a while. The fond softness in his eyes when he looks at Ben from over the table at lunch. The way his knees press against Ben's own from across the booth.

By evening, when they finally return to the hotel, Ben is sure he's losing his mind. His skin is humming with sensation, anticipation. They still haven't, strictly speaking, actually fucked. Ben cringes at the phrase, even as he internally corrects himself. Of course, it's not as though what they've already done is any less significant, any less intimate. By now, he knows George's naked body almost as well as he does his own.

And it's not as though he's not ready. He's been ready, if he's being honest with himself, probably since the first time they'd had dinner. But George, evidently, is in no rush.

Of course he'd had his hopes that it would finally happen this weekend. George's hesitance may have had him worried, but honestly Ben knows himself well enough to recognize when he's being paranoid. Surely this was just about waiting for the right moment.

George tells him to hop in the shower, and Ben can't even make a cheeky joke. All he can do is comply. He cleans himself up as best he can, while moving as swiftly as his limbs can manage. When he steps out, he briefly considers getting back into his clothes. But what would be the point of that?

He steps out of the bathroom to see George standing in the center of the room, patient. Ben doesn't think he'll ever tire of this: George's gaze, warm and intent and just this side of wild, sweeping up his body before re-lighting on his face, the small smile that tugs at the corners of his mouth. He steps forward at once, gets a hand in Ben's hair, carding his fingers through the damp strands.

"There is a great deal that I've been meaning to try with you," George says. There's not even anything overtly seductive in his tone: it's his normal voice, more or less, but it still makes Ben's breath hitch.

"You do seem like a man with a plan," says Ben, as lightly as he can.

"I am," says George, with none of Ben's levity. And that's quite enough talking.

He lets his hand rest on the edge of the towel, and he waits for Ben's nod before tugging it gently away. Ben shivers.

Yes, he has a plan, but he's learning to be flexible. And even if George's intention is for this evening to end in new territory, it doesn't seem unreasonable that it should begin on more familiar ground. So when Ben falls somewhat gracelessly onto his knees and raises his hands to the fly of George's trousers, he's happy to allow for the minor distraction from his roadmap.

As pleasant as the detour is, George only lets it go on for so long before he orders Ben back on his feet, and from there to the center of the bed. He makes sure the boy looks comfortable (on his back, engulfed with mounds of crisp white hotel linen, he looks very comfortable indeed) before climbing up himself, moving to kneel in between his spread legs. He runs his palms over Ben's thighs. He's still warm from his shower, and smells not quite like himself but of the bleach from the towels and whatever brand of soap they use here: oranges and herbs. But the body under his hands is entirely familiar. At this point George feels like he knows it almost as well as he knows his own; all lithe muscle and sinew and soft, pale skin.

"Relax for me," he says. "Can you do that?"

"Yes," Ben swears, his voice high.

"I've wanted this for a long time," George continues. "Will you keep still for me? Will you be good?"

Ben's response is not much more than a bitten-off series of breathless curses, but George gets the gist. He pauses, briefly considers asking Ben to turn over onto his front. But half of what he's been anticipating is the faces Ben is sure to make, the sounds he is sure to produce. He wants his view unimpeded, and Ben's voice unmuffled.

So instead he grabs a few pillows from the top of the bed and shoves them under Ben's hips. Ben lets out a ragged breath with the first experimental swipe at his hole, and it's only George's hand splayed over his abdomen that keeps him from jerking back and away from the sheer shock of it. But George has expected that.

It doesn't take him long to pick up the pace and the pressure, Ben's voice steadily ascending in volume and pitch as he does so. He can't decide if he should like to make Ben come from just this, or if he wants to feel him finish with George inside him. Both options are awfully appealing. But he opts for the latter, mostly so he can take in the delicious whine that Ben lets out when George pulls away, the breathless, pleading *no, don't stop* that follows shortly afterward

"Don't worry," George says, thumbing idly at the crest of Ben's hip, "I'll take care of you, I promise."

Ben groans at that, throwing his head back against the pillows in frustration. George sees no reason to resist the temptation to climb up and get his mouth on the exposed column of that perfect throat. So he doesn't try.

"George, *please*," Ben huffs after a few minutes of this. "I thought there was a plan."

George chuckles, pulls away to sit back on his heels and take in the picture Ben makes. He's blindsided by a sudden upwelling of affection for this brilliant, beautiful young man, so open and vulnerable for him. How much more satisfying, he thinks, to have earned the privilege of this view after months of patient waiting than to have fallen into some more fragile, if more easily won arrangement?

He would never have allowed himself the exquisite luxury of lavishing so many words of uninhibited praise on any of the other young man he had for a night or two, always conscious as he was of the possibility that it might mean giving them some kind of leverage over him. And besides, no one had ever inspired him to words of adoration like Ben did. He couldn't have even said why this was, only that it was true.

There was nothing quite like watching the way Ben responds to George's encouragement, the way he strains to earn his approval, makes no secret of his striving, never tries to hold himself aloof. It makes something in George's chest positively *ache*, makes his fingers itch to lavish him with tender touches, to knead out the knots between his shoulder blades, to watch him drift off to sleep and watch him blink blearily into wakefulness again. It's not a feeling he knows very well. But he likes it.

He leaves Ben like this, face up, hands twisted in the sheets, while he grabs a condom from his bag and gets himself sorted. He can see Ben look up, momentarily confused, ready to ask George where he's going, ready to beg him not to leave. He's surprisingly silent while George slicks himself up, his eyes wide, his mouth slightly open.

He pushes in, almost too slowly, exercising every ounce of his self-restraint not to rush forward into that impossibly tight, welcoming heat. Ben takes him in so well, his eyes screwed shut, breathing through it.

"Look at me, Benjamin," he says after he bottoms out, his stern tone and the use of his full name enough to ensure his boy obeys him. Ben blinks. There are tears gathered at the corners of his eyes, but his gaze is clear, the set of his jaw bespeaking an inviolable determination.

"You can move," Ben says, his voice steady and strong. "Please."

But George takes a moment more, lets the need for more friction accumulate steadily in his nerves until he can't possibly resist it any more. And then it's just...the slightest shift, the most restricted roll of his hips. Ben gasps into it nonetheless, but he gives George no indication that he's in pain. So he continues.

It is bliss itself. He holds Ben's legs by the backs of his knees, and he can practically feel Ben's pulse thrumming under his fingertips. He gets into a rhythm, and Ben starts to push back in tandem, meeting his thrusts as best he can given his limited leverage. But it does a lot for George to see how hungry he is, how desperate for it. The sordid sound of skin on skin resounds through the room until they're masked by the sound of Ben's rising groans until Ben is crying out with every thrust, still hard between them. It takes George a little while to realize that there are actual words, half-garbled but discernible, amidst the gasps and moans; Ben begging, *pleading* with him to be allowed to come. His grip is likely too rough, his timing imperfect, but it takes hardly a dozen hasty strokes before Ben is coming in ropes across his own chest and stomach. George feels some of it smear into his skin, and it's not a sensation that he'd ever thought would turn him on as much as it does. Beneath him, Ben has gone loose-limbed and quiet, and shockingly it doesn't take much more to push George over the edge than to watch Ben's face as he recovers his breath, looks up at George with his chest still flushed and heaving. He smiles, and George is finished.

He doesn't want to pull out, doesn't want to retreat from the haven of Ben's body, but he knows how prone his boy is to overstimulation, and in any case he doesn't want to crush Ben under his weight. There will be time, he thinks, to try their hand at it, however. Time to explore the possibilities inherent in pushing Ben to see just how much sensation he can take. But tonight is not the night for that. So he goes to the bathroom to discard the condom, run a washcloth under the warm water. He takes his time cleaning Ben up, maneuvering him so he can actually lie down between the sheets instead of sprawled out on top of the coverlet, and soon enough George is joining him in sleep.

The next day, they quite decide that they've seen all the sights Skaneateles has to offer. George had wrangled them a late check-out with apparently no effort at all, and so they're able to spend the majority of the day in bed.

Ben naps in the car on the way home (having not in fact had much occasion for sleeping since George had awoken him early that morning with his mouth on Ben's cock) and George takes the few hours behind the wheel to do some serious thinking. He's been terribly remiss in some of his responsibilities, he thinks. He has a great deal to do to correct the mistake.

He drops Ben off in front of his apartment, after sharing a long and languorous kiss goodnight. As soon as he sees Ben safely slip through the front door of his building, he picks up his phone.

His EA picks up, as his his custom, after fewer than three rings. A call this late, Gilbert knows better than to try and begin the conversation with unnecessary pleasantries. He just listens, at perfect attention.

"I need you to forward me Jacob Read's contact information," George begins. "And to speak with the Security Office and get them to deliver me all records pertaining to internal investigations conducted between September and December 2013. Have it on my desk first thing."

The voice on the other end of the line is crisp, dutiful.

"Consider it done, sir."

Chapter 13

January, 2017

Ben wakes up earlier than is his wont, blinking blearily at his alarm for a moment as he remembers why he had set it for such an ungodly hour in the first place. But the moment he remembers he moves with alacrity, dresses with far less grumbling and yawning than normal. Even makes his bed.

He does something else unusual -- goes into his living room, and switches on his TV. He flips through channels for a little while, searching, before he finds the one he wants and turns the volume up.

The droning hum of background noise filling the floor of the New York Stock Exchange filters through his TV speakers and into his apartment.

"After the break," says the fast, pattering voice of the host, seated in an immaculate suit at a high-top, gleaming desk, "Mount Vernon Financial CEO George Washington, here to talk about the strategy behind Continental Group's dramatic new program of diversification in their product lineup. Stay tuned."

Ben leaves the volume on high, so he can hear when the commercials have finished cycling, and goes back into the kitchen, starts pulling stuff out of his fridge to make himself a sandwich for lunch as his coffee maker runs.

A few minutes later he settles back onto his couch, mug in hand, and tucks his feet beneath him as the commercials cut out.

Now the grey-suited host is joined by a more familiar figure. George looks for all the world like this isn't an entirely uncivilized time to be awake; shaved and pressed and the usually stiff resting expression that graces his features decidedly softened for the camera.

"Thanks again for joining us, George," says Grey Suit.

"It's a pleasure to be here," says George graciously.

"Let's go ahead and bring up in the elephant in the room," says Grey Suit. "We've had you on the show before to discuss Continental's response to the lending crisis, the role of private financial institutions in infrastructure investment, and so on. But you're here today to talk about something very different. Tell us, why is an established corporation like Mount Vernon diving so deeply into the nitty gritty of agricultural innovation, of all things?"

"Well, what we're seeing is that the boundaries that define what a company is and what it can do are increasingly permeable. General Electric, for example, we've seen move in the other direction, from a sole focus on manufacturing to offering broad-based financial services, and so on. Additionally, we believe that there are multiple downsides to corporations that deal solely in financial management without placing any priority on producing...."

It goes on in much this vein. George speaks in eloquent paragraphs, and Ben finds himself smiling a little stupidly at how well he comports himself in front of the cameras. The interviewers don't seem interested in lobbing him anything but softballs, but Ben still feels like he hits his points squarely. He doesn't often get the chance to see George in his element like this, at once energetic and at ease. But he likes it.

There is one question he gets, however, that manages to grab Ben's attention.

"Now," Grey Suit continues, "there has been speculation that this strategy has been pursued quite unilaterally by Mount Vernon, and doesn't really reflect the policies and priorities of Continental as a whole. Can you speak to that?"

As Ben watches, George's smile goes a little tight, his eyes a little hard; it's not enough for the casual viewer or even the hosts to notice, Ben is sure. He only picks up on it because of how fluent the past nine months have allowed him to become in deciphering the subtle signals broadcast by George's well-disciplined expressions. But it's not in his imagination.

"Well, I'll tell you that the great benefit of having the kind of relationship that we have with Continental is that we have the opportunity to go out on a limb without incurring the kind of risk..."

Ben tunes out the rest of his answer, caught up as he is with watching George's face, parsing every imperceptible shift in his features and wishing that his TV wasn't actually so old it couldn't pick up the HD.

"Well that's all the time we have," says Grey Suit after a few more minutes of back-and-forth. "George, a pleasure as always."

"A pleasure to be here."

The host gives another short spiel about their next interview, and the screen cuts back to commercials. Ben sits back against the couch cushions for a moment, thoughtful. He gives it maybe five minutes, time enough for George to get unmicced, and then he picks up his phone.

George isn't surprised by the ringing phone in his pocket, but he is surprised to see who's calling. They're not in the habit of speaking before work, the possibility of distraction too acute. And George prefers to leave any thoughts of Ben for when he's safely concluded his business for the day, and he's free to let his focus roam to greener pastures.

"Ben. Is everything alright? Don't you have school soon? "

"Everything's fine," says Ben, indulgent. "I just wanted to call and let you know that I thought you did a good job."

George blinks. It had never occurred to him that Ben might be watching.

"I didn't know you made a habit of turning on CNBC so early in the morning," he says carefully. Ben laughs.

"You know I don't," says Ben, "Gilbert let me know that you were going to be on. He thought I wouldn't want to miss it."

George makes a mental note to upbraid his traitorous EA.

"I do these kinds of interviews all the time," George says, hoping it doesn't sound like he's being evasive. "It's not as though I was keeping the information from you on purpose. I just didn't think that you would be that interested."

"It's fine, honestly," says Ben. "I knew it had to be something like that. But I'm still glad that I knew it was happening. I enjoyed it. You looked good up there."

The honesty and simplicity of the praise shouldn't be enough to affect him, but it is. He feels warmed through, his mind gone somewhere quiet and still, though no one would be able to tell it by looking at him.

George wants to stay on the line for a few minutes more. It's rare that they get the chance to talk so early in the morning and he finds himself savoring it. But before they can continue their conversation George's phone buzzes to tell him he has a call waiting.

For a moment he considers not taking it (it's just Gilbert, probably telling him his first meeting of the day has been postponed -- that's usually the subject of calls that come this time of day) but his professionalism gets the better of him. At any rate the morning is getting on and Ben must be getting close to school by now. So they say their goodbyes and George switches lines.

But Gilbert isn't calling about his morning meetings.

"I'm very sorry, sir, to have to tell you this," he says, voice grave, "but Nathaniel Sackett was found dead in his office this morning. The police are here and they're going to need to ask you a couple of questions."

George is momentarily caught off balance by this news, but his period of disequilibrium only lasts for the space of a few heartbeats before he recollects himself, squares his shoulders, hails down a cab, and starts for the office.

It's ugly, uglier than he thought it would be. More blood than he thought there would be. More blood than he's seen in a long time.

He appreciates that the police have done a fairly good job sequestering Sackett's office from any passersby. The only person who seems to have stumbled into the scene was his senior postdoc who had arrived early that morning and discovered her boss face down on his desk.

There isn't much that they can ask him -- any questions about after-hours access to the building or to the floor having been referred to internal security, and the inconsolable postdoc unlikely to be of much use as a source of information until they can get her calmed down (George certainly can't fault her for that considering how it must have felt to walk in such a scene.) But they don't pester him overmuch. In fact, George finds himself doubting whether they are actually viewing the situation with the appropriate level of suspicion.

The first thing the George asks them is whether or not the other lab members can confirm that anything had been taken. At first the police are not certain what he means. Sackett's wallet is gone, and his car missing from the garage. As far as they're concerned that constitutes a motive enough. But George knew some about this man, even if he could never have claimed to know him well. He knew that Sackett scarcely ever had more than \$50 in his wallet at any given time (that is, at least on the days when he did not in fact forget to bring his wallet with him to work, which happened frequently.) George also knows that he drove a 1999 Dodge dart, which could hardly constitute a temptation for a hardened car thief.

Just as he expects, an emergency board meeting is held before the week is out. And again just as he suspects the news is not good.

Henry Laurens is sitting in a chair across his desk looking even more dour and sober than George has ever seen him. It's never a good day when he has to have Laurens in his office; he's rarely, if ever, a bearer of good tidings. He's never been a difficult man for George to read: short-tempered, irascible, but loyal. George knows that he can trust his word now.

"What's the verdict?" he asks, his voice sounding exhausted and threadbare even to himself.

"You should be able to weather the storm," says Laurens carefully. "But don't expect it to blow over for a little while."

George grunts his acknowledgement. It's no worse than he should have anticipated.

"Who do you think wants my head on a plate more? Conway or Gates?"

Laurens purses his lips.

"Mifflin did the talking. But no one has any doubt where they stand. You know they're just looking for an opportunity."

George is quiet for a moment, thoughtful. Yes, a sizeable fraction of the board had been seeking an excuse to oust him for months now, maybe years. And they may just have been given one.

"You mentioned you have some idea of who was responsible?" asks Laurens, breaking the silence.

"I know it's connected to the data breach last year," he says. "If we can determine who was behind that, we'll know who did this."

Laurens stares at him for a little while, mouth pinched in consternation.

"There was no data breach," he says, wary of invoking George's anger. "Wasn't that what security concluded? Worthington's student just misplaced the drives. He *said* so."

"Sackett never believed it," says George.

"George, that man was so paranoid, he wouldn't even let us send his salary through direct deposit," says Laurens, lip curled in distaste at such stubborn resistance to businesslike efficiency. "Payroll had to mail him a check every two weeks. To a P.O. box. He wouldn't even give his home address."

"Well, paranoid or not," says George, "that doesn't mean he was wrong."

Laurens sighs.

"Just keep this to yourself, then? I mean, it's alright when it's just you and me, but--"

"Henry," says George, a decided edge to his voice now, "they did this for a *reason*. They did it this *way* for a reason."

"Who is 'they,' George? Can you hear yourself? I'm begging you, keep quiet about this until we know more, or at least until I can shore up your position among the board. They're feeling pretty antsy, and understandably so. Now is not the time to antagonize them with conspiracy theories."

George scoffs.

"So they're going to replace me? Who with?"

"They weren't talking about replacement," says Laurens. "They were talking about rescinding Mount Vernon's affiliate status and resuming direct management of all your projects. They think they've let your leash get a little too long."

George could come up with several colorful responses to *that* assessment, but he keeps them to

himself.

"So that's it then? Keep my head down? That's your advice?"

"It's not bad advice," says Laurens, in the very tone that George is sure he must employ on his children when they're being wayward. If George didn't need Laurens for an ally, he would certainly protest at being so condescended to. But he'll take it.

The day after Laurens comes into his office, the storm, as he'd predicted, blows in. If his leash had been too long, it's shortened in one stroke.

He's ordered, in no uncertain terms, to keep his hands out of the mess: not to contact the police with any questions or suggestions about how to conduct their investigation, not to volunteer even the slightest amount of information to the press, and to refer all internal inquiries to headquarters. George isn't sure what to say. Frankly, that they'd managed to keep it out of the papers as completely as they have is astonishing to him, and concerning.

He wants to protest, and vociferously. He wants to rail at them that their myopic refusal to accept the reality that their security has been compromised since August will have dire consequences, that it already *has* had dire consequences. He wants to up the ante, wants to threaten to walk if they don't at least consider what he has to say, what he's been trying to say for months. He wants to make something *happen*.

But he does nothing. He keeps his head down. Just like he was told.

When he goes home that evening, he's understandably feeling quite miserable, the three days remaining in the week stretching before him like an endless desert waste. He thinks of Ben, and wonders if he ought to call.

They're due to see each other again on Saturday, but George finds he doesn't want to wait to see his boy's face, to hear his voice. He needs it now. So he closes the blinds, loosens the knot on his tie, checks the time.

Ben will be home now. George lets himself picture it: Ben in his small, shabby bedroom. Reading, or grading, or even just putting away his laundry, maybe humming to himself along with the music blaring from his laptop speakers. Maybe still in his school clothes, slacks and one of the old fraying sweaters he won't let George replace. Or maybe he'd gone for a run, and loiters now around his apartment in basketball shorts and one of the t-shirts he's pilfered from George's closet, socked feet sliding over the cracked linoleum floor in the kitchen as he makes himself dinner.

George draws in a deep breath, feels the sudden surge of want that threatens to carry him off whenever he lets himself think of Ben like this, utterly at ease, in the comfort of his own space. It's a curious thing, but though he usually curses the miles that separate them so much of the time, he can't deny the fact that there's a kind of sweetness to that ache, a kind of low thrill in the way it hones the sharp edge of his desire. It's almost better than closeness, than contentment: it's a visceral, deep hunger that he's not entirely sure he wants satisfied.

He flips his laptop open, logs into the video chat software they had installed for this singular purpose.

It is in fact, as Ben assures him, an excellent time, and George wins a few happy, distracted hours where the only sound in his ears is Ben's voice, and the only thought in his head is the memorized sensation of Ben's touch.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Maybe it's the season, maybe it's the weather, maybe it's the pile of quizzes waiting to be graded that have been sitting on his coffee table for three days untouched, but Ben really isn't sure he wants to be here.

The wind is whipping across the station platform, enough to make his cheeks go numb just from a few minutes standing in its path. He lets out a yawn, hoists his messenger bag higher onto his shoulder. He feels terrible even thinking it, but he'd rather be home, rather spend the night on his couch catching up with *Game of Thrones* and eating Chinese takeout than enduring the train ride into the city. And then, he reminds himself, he has to endure the city itself: all the steel and concrete even more stark than normal, dirty slush and salt-stained streets and locals who are, if possible, even grumpier than usual. Maybe he can convince George to let them stay home, turn in early. But Ben knows he wants to make an evening of it, will want to make up for the fact that it will be weeks before they have the chance to see each other again, with the way their schedules have shaken out.

Still, the only thing Ben is really craving right now besides Netflix and a plate of General Tso's is the chance to rest his head against George's broad back, to drift off to the steady in-and-out of his breath, the sound and rhythm of it like waves upon the shore.

He coughs loudly into his elbow, huffs his annoyance at the lateness of the train, and wraps his arms around himself again, praying for a respite from the cold.

His mood isn't improved when he helps an older woman lug her truly massive suitcase up the stairs to the platform and stubs his toe on the last step. He swallows the eloquent string of curses that threaten to rise up and burst from his mouth, but it's a near thing, and he's practically snarling with irritation by the time the train finally pulls into the station.

Ben has to rush from Grand Central to the restaurant where George had decided they should meet, and he's already feeling a low fluttering anxiety when he steps through the door, five minutes after their reservation. He's not at all looking forward to George's bland expression, his raised eyebrow, his off-hand comment that if Ben's watch isn't working, George can always get him another (as if the one he has already, which George purchased for him back in October, wasn't engineered to last until the next ice age -- with the price tag to match)

But George isn't there.

Ben takes a moment to get a handle on his feeling of shock. George doesn't run late. George is *never* late. A minor miracle given that he lives in a city where travel times could often be completely unpredictable, but he had always managed it, somehow. It's one of the things about him that Ben has always found most consistent, and most astonishing.

He resists the urge to call, not wanting to be a nag, especially when he knows George must be already quite frustrated with himself. But five minutes becomes fifteen, becomes thirty, and Ben actually types out a quick " *eta?* " before deleting it and returning his phone to his pocket. George will get here when he gets here, and not a moment before. He can be patient.

It's another quarter of an hour before George finally appears, clearly distracted but full of apology,

and Ben chooses to put off asking about the holdup by focusing on the way George reaches for his hand over the table (the fleeting gesture of public affection still new enough to send a thrill up his spine) and the way George's cheeks are just a little pink from the relentless wind outside.

"Your train got in alright?" George asks, sounding uncharacteristically absent-minded. Ben smiles back blandly. Of course it got in alright, considering Ben is *here* now, and actually was here precisely when he was supposed to be.

"Yeah, it was fine. No delays."

"Good. That's very good," he says, looking at his menu. Ben frowns.

"Is everything alright with you?" Ben asks, trying his best to sound casual. Something flashes across George's face, an expression too fleeting for Ben to identify.

"Just a little...unexpected chaos at the office. It's nothing you need to worry about, I promise."

Something about that statement tugs at a fraying thread in Ben's memory, makes a familiar chill pass over his skin. It's honestly uncanny.

" Things are just a little chaotic right now. It's nothing I can't handle. I'll tell you some other time, but I'm tired of thinking about it." Then the flash of a smile, a defiant tilt to that proud head.

But Ben keeps calm.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asks.

George purses his lips, his expression somewhat pained to Ben's trained eye.

"I can't," he says bluntly. "I'm sorry. The situation is complex. You understand."

Ben isn't sure he does. But he nods, takes a gulp of water, hoping to head off what he recognizes as the insidious beginnings of a headache building behind his eyes.

He hadn't really realized how under the weather he was, so caught up in the whirlwind of activity that constituted his week, but Ben can't really taste his food, can't really even whip up the bare minimum level of interest in whatever it was George ordered for him. Still, he's surprised when George calls over a waiter and tells them to pack their entrees to-go.

"What --"

"We need to get you home," says George, and Ben bristles. He's *fine* , honest to god, what's the point in making such a fuss?

But it's a blessed relief to find himself in the backseat of the warm, quiet cab that takes them across town, and it's even better when George wraps an arm around his shoulders to pull him in, by now a half-unconscious gesture that Ben is perfectly happy to make into a habit. Ben lets his head fall to rest on George's shoulder, lets his awareness of the world outside the windows drift away.

He has to pull away when the blast of cold dry air that hits them as they climb out of the cab triggers a fit of coughing. George looks far too concerned.

"It's just a bug I've been trying to shake for a few days," Ben insists preemptively. "Nothing major."

What he's afraid of, honestly, is for George to completely over-react, to fuss and hover and give Ben no recourse or escape from the knowledge that he's singlehandedly spoiled whatever George

had planned for these few days. He doesn't want to have a reason to be annoyed at George, doesn't want to have to put fuel on the tiny, smoldering fire of resentment that's been building in him all night.

He doesn't like feeling this way, doesn't like that his mind doesn't hesitate to make the leap from mild annoyance to unshakeable doubt, to asking the questions that he dreads almost more than anything.

Is this working? When will it stop? When will I ruin it? When will it end?

But while George doesn't let him brush it off, he also doesn't seem to have any intention of smothering him. As soon as they're in the door, he fetches Ben a glass of water unasked for, but he doesn't hound him to drink it. He gently suggests they just put on a movie, for no other reason than that it's too early to go to bed.

He lets Ben pick at his food without comment, ignores the way Ben sniffs and sneezes through the spaghetti western that Ben can't even recall the title of, the black-and-white frames all blending together into a mass of stark landscapes and bad accents.

Ben goes into the bathroom about halfway through the movie and finds a bottle of NyQuil set out on the counter. He down a double dose and doesn't bother returning to the living room, just strips down to his undershirt and boxers and slips between the sheets of George's bed, already feeling the heavy pull of the medicine weighing down his limbs, urging his eyes to close.

He feigns sleep when, a few minutes later, he hears the door open, hears the sound of George's heavy footfalls. He's not sure if George is fooled, but one way or another, the other man says nothing. Ben hears him strip out of his own shirt and slacks, and he really must be sick or the NyQuil must be more effective than he thought, because it's the first time that the thought of George out of his clothes isn't enough to make Ben's heart pound, his breath catch.

George keeps his distance when he gets into bed, and Ben briefly considers abandoning his ruse, admitting he's still awake, apologizing as best he can for ruining their evening and begging George's forgiveness. He hates this distance, hates what it inevitably reminds him of, *who* it reminds him of, but he doesn't know how to close it. How to fix it. How can he, when he isn't even sure what's broken?

It's you, says that unshakeable voice in his head. *You're broken. You'll drive him away. You know you will. How else did you imagine this would go?*

Behind him, George shifts on the mattress with a long, low sigh. Suddenly they're closer: not touching, not exactly, but Ben can feel the radiant warmth of George's body against his own, is almost overcome with the urge to lean back into it, to be enveloped by it.

George grumbles something incoherent, and Ben wonders if maybe he hasn't already drifted off himself. He's always been a little envious of how quickly George can fall asleep, such an incongruous ability for someone who carries so much responsibility, so many heavy cares. But then George reaches out, shifts closer, and Ben feels his anxiety begin to slowly ebb away at the touch of that great, graceless hand. It's not quite enough, it's not quite what he wants (to not be tired, not be sick, to roll George over onto his back and watch his face from above, watch him twist and strain and to *feel* him.) But it's something.

Ben falls asleep to the sensation of George's hand under his shirt, running lazily over the skin of his back, his fears momentarily silenced.

A few days later, he's tidying up his classroom at the end of the day when Nate walks through his door.

"So I just realized," he starts, parking himself on one of the desks in the first row, "you haven't said anything about plans for your birthday."

Ben ignores him for the moment, keeps his attention firmly rooted in the task of returning all his wayward pens to their proper place in the chipped coffee mug on his desk.

"I don't have any," he admits after a while.

Nate's eyes narrow.

"You mean your gentleman caller wasn't planning on flying you up to some luxury resort in the Yukon and having his way with you for three days?"

Ben wrinkles his nose.

"What the fuck -- no, Nate, it's not -- we haven't talked about it," he sputters. "I haven't told him."

"But I thought his birthday was like, three days before yours. You're telling me you're not gonna take the opportunity to be all gross and romantic about it?"

Ben goes to return a book to his shelf, and he isn't even looking in Nate's direction when he responds.

"I honestly hadn't thought about it."

"Liar."

Ben bites his tongue. He knows Nate is just trying to get a rise out of him. He *knows* it, and yet--

"I was just gonna stay in town. We could do something, if you wanted. I could text Caleb."

He's stalling, and he's sure Nate knows it too. But he's dreading the question, the inevitable question that he's frankly been waiting to hear for months. If anything, he has to admire Nate's restraint, that he's managed to hold off asking for so long.

"So, wait -- how much older is he, exactly?"

Ben feels his insides twist, feels the sudden ugly urge to lie. He'd do it, if he didn't know how easy it would be for Nate to find out the truth for himself. It's not something he's proud of, the knowledge that he'd deceive his dear friend about something like this, but he can't deny the fact, at least not to himself.

He needs to give a straight answer.

"Nineteen years," he says, certain he sounds more than a little defensive but entirely unable to help himself.

He doesn't say that it's a number that rests on a technicality, that but for the three days that separate their birthdates, it would be a round twenty. He couldn't explain why the one year makes so much of a difference, but fuck if he isn't going to cling to it with everything he has.

Nate keeps his face blessedly blank. Doesn't look disgusted, doesn't frown, doesn't laugh in Ben's face. Nate's never felt particularly bound by the necessity of keeping his opinions to himself. In

fact it was always his big mouth that got him in trouble in school, that started fights Ben was often compelled to finish. But really, how is he supposed to respond to this? What could he say?

Wow, well, whatever revs your engine I guess.

Does this guy have a lot of experience robbing the cradle, or did he just start with you?

I didn't realize you were so hard up for cash. You know you could have come to me if you were having trouble making rent.

Ben imagines a dozen different blistering responses, a dozen different ways for Nate to put the spark to whatever this *thing* is that Ben has been fighting for days now: this black sludge of doubt and dread like crude pooled in a slick on top of the churning sea of his mind.

He almost wants him to. In fact, he *does* want it. He wants the fight. Wants the excuse. Wants to be released from the cloud of intrusive thoughts like buzzing gnats that will not leave him be. George doesn't want him. George doesn't respect him. He'd be better off breaking things off now, himself, before giving George the chance to make the choice for him.

His right hand goes to his left wrist, tugging and twisting unconsciously at the steel band of his watch, the *fucking* watch that he should never have accepted, that costs more than his car and that sometimes feels like nothing so much as a shackle, tying him to this relationship that he doesn't understand and isn't sure he can control.

Never mind the fact that he had felt his whole body go warm when he'd received it. Never mind that George's fingers had been so impossibly gentle when he'd fastened the band around Ben's wrist, his expression impossibly soft. Never mind that it had come at the end of a night when George had all but demanded Ben give a play-by-play of the latest speech tournament he had chaperoned, asking after individual students by name and just being so clearly invested in their efforts that Ben had been moved almost to pain by it.

But Nate says nothing.

His shoulders slumped, his eyes a little wide, he looks up at him and Ben can only recall the caustic, guarded, but mouthy young man he'd met all those years ago their first week at Yale.

"Well, you know what you're doing," Nate says, lamely. And he walks out of Ben's classroom.

Chapter End Notes

Don't overdo it on the cold meds, kids. Do as I say, not as Ben does.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the longer wait this time around, everyone. I just started class and it's gonna be a bit of an adjustment. I have the next few chapters well laid-out though, and updates should be coming at their old frequency very soon.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Yale Debate Invitational, February 2017

Ben carries two coffees into the tabulation room, the perimeter of which is haunted by a pacing Nate, scowling and sighing and generally looking like death after two days of ceaseless competition.

He presses one cup into Nate's hand, noting the surreptitious glances cast their way by the undergrads hunched over the judging tables, scribbling fiercely and conferring with each other over this score or that panel.

"Don't you wanna sit down?" Ben asks him. "You're making people nervous."

Nate scoffs, ignores the question, takes the cup and settles with his back against the wall, his scowl deepening.

"They're taking their sweet time," he says, his voice a half-snarl that Ben recognizes very well, and that he knows will dissipate with the proper application of caffeine.

"Cut them some slack," Ben says, with more patience than perhaps he really feels, but he can't escape a pang of sympathy for the students charged with running the tournament, a largely thankless task he had shared just a few years ago, toiling away in the very same room, in many cases the very same coaches breathing down his neck.

While Ben is momentarily wandering through his memories, a nervous little freshman presses a packet of results into Nate's hands. Ben has to wonder at how his friend had convinced them to let him have a sneak peak at the numbers before they were publicly posted, but he just chalks it up to one of Nate's many inexplicable small talents.

Nate snatches the papers from the student's hands, and stares at the top sheet results for a moment, eyes a little wide, his mouth pinched.

"What happened?" asks Ben, a little knot of dread beginning to coil in his stomach. "Are we done?"

Nate's expression doesn't change, but he shakes his head. That knot of dread in Ben's gut cinches tighter. He resists the urge to steal the page out of Nate's hand, so he has to wait a beat before Nate speaks.

"We're not done," he says. "Ben, half the team made it to the outrounds."

"You're kidding."

"I'm not," says Nate, the dour, stony look on his face finally giving way to a brilliant smile. "Look at it for yourself."

Ben does. And sure enough, not just half, but *more* than half of all the events in which they had students entered showed their kids breaking into the elimination rounds. Which, considering the fact that they were up against teams from some of the most elite schools in the country...was no insignificant thing. Ben grins at the thought of delivering the news to the gaggle of high schoolers congregating in the hall.

All in all, a pretty good day.

Ben falls back against his pillow with a sigh, the sensation of sweat beading on his forehead and the worn jersey sheets under his back vivid and sharp on his too-sensitive skin. From his laptop speakers, down at the end of the bed, he can hear George continuing to work himself over, just the sound of his labored breathing loud enough to actually make it through the mic, the slide of skin on skin too faint for Ben to hear through the sound of his own pulse rushing through his ears. Ben's mind is all liquid, buzzing fucked-out static and fuzz, and he's not really able to come up with anything particularly eloquent to push George over, but that doesn't stop him from trying.

"Fuck, yeah, that's it," he says. "Come for me. Come on."

He's not looking at the screen, too wiped to lift his head up from the mattress, but he can hear George's breathing hitch, hear the rhythm of his strokes stutter.

" *Jesus, Ben, I'm--* "

"Imagine I'm there," Ben interrupts, his mouth going off, it seems, without even a cursory check-in with his brain. "Come like you're in me, like you're filling me up with it."

" *God--* "

A few moments more is all it takes, the low sound that wells up from George's throat and builds steadily until the moment of his climax by now very familiar to Ben.

The silence that follows is familiar too, Ben just listening to George catch his breath, followed immediately by the rustle of fabric that lets him know that George has risen from his hotel bed. Ben isn't sure how he does it, how he summons the energy to move so soon after even the most shattering orgasm, but he's given up searching for explanations for why George is as he is. It's a futile exercise.

He hears George shift his Thinkpad from the bed to the hotel desk, hears him settle himself into a chair.

"Are you still with me?" he asks Ben, voice a little thick, his tone all indulgence.

Three weeks after they had last been face-to-face, and the prolonged absence was evidently taking its toll on George's mood. Ben, for his part, isn't particularly bothered by the time apart. He misses him, of course he does, but it's not an ache that's particularly debilitating. He has found himself now and again imagining how it will be to see him again, to find release for the pressure building up beneath his skin and in the undercurrent of his awareness, and the scenes his mind weaves for him are never less than captivating, but it doesn't feel like too much to ask for him to be made to wait a little longer.

Of course he's not anxious to find out how long is too long. He suspects he might be a little

overconfident in his estimation of his own resilience. It's one thing to withstand the time apart when he's busy, distracted. It would be something else entirely without a whirlwind of work for him to get himself lost in.

But still, there's an undeniable element of power in it. In wanting less than he himself *is wanted*, needing less than he is needed. He understands how that might be something he could use to his advantage. How that might be a temptation.

With an exaggerated groan, Ben drags himself up to sitting. He doesn't try to cover any part of his nakedness from the sight of the camera, that old instinct well-and-truly trained out of him, and he doesn't miss the way that, even as sated as he is, George's eyes rake over the visible planes of his thighs and his chest before his gaze comes to rest on Ben's face.

"Yeah," he says. "Sorry about that. I'm still a little wiped from this weekend."

"How did that go, by the way?" George asks, glancing at something on his phone. "I didn't get the chance to ask."

Ben laughs a little nervously. No, they hadn't really taken much time for small talk, considering once Ben got his computer up-and-running George practically already had his hand down his pants. Ben had rolled with it. But the new sense of urgency had been a little strange to him.

"That's alright," he says.

"But it went well?" George asks, putting his phone facedown on the desk so he can give Ben his undivided attention.

"Really well," says Ben. "Way better than expected, actually. Most of our kids made it into elimination rounds, which is just...really something. A few of them even placed."

"I'm glad to hear it," says George, and god, Ben still isn't used to the sincerity in that statement, the way that Ben can *see* how much he means it. His face relaxes just a fraction, and the line of his shoulders shifts just so, and Ben marvels a little at the change. *He's happy because I'm happy*. No matter how many times it happened, Ben still can't quite believe it's true.

"So how's LA?" Ben asks. George grimaces.

"Crowded."

"Yeah I've heard they're pretty famous for that," says Ben, offhand. "But are you at least enjoying the sunshine?"

George just raises an eyebrow at that. As though he were out there to enjoy the weather and the beaches. He probably hasn't been able to do more than take a few breaths of smog-soaked city air in the brief intervals between leaving his hotel room and stepping into meetings.

Ben isn't actually precisely sure what George is doing all the way out there. He's been curiously cagey about it. He's been curiously cagey about almost anything to do with work, actually, for the past few weeks. Ben has tried not to think too much into it. And he doesn't ask for more now.

"Yeah, I've really made some progress on my tan," says George, voice flat. Ben laughs.

"But tell me more about the tournament," George says, his expression attentive even though Ben can tell he's going to need to get to bed in a few minutes. But Ben talks anyway, and George listens. And Ben's still on the line when he falls asleep, his occasional one-word queries and hums of

acknowledgment fading into deep, even breaths.

He doesn't close the connection off for some time, but just lies there, listening.

The first surprise of the next day comes, thankfully, during his planning period.

There's a knock on his classroom door, and he opens it to discover a young man in a trim deliveryman's uniform, holding, of all things, a vase of flowers.

"Benjamin Tallmadge?"

Ben hesitates, the incongruity of the situation hitting him hard.

"Yes?"

"I need you to sign for these."

He holds out his little digital pad for Ben to scrawl his signature into, then presses the delicate vase into Ben's hand and turns on his heel down the hall.

Ben stands in a the door for a beat, still a little bemused, before coming back to himself enough to retreat into the safety of his classroom, where he won't be bothered by any prying eyes from the hallway.

He sets the vase down on the desk, and reaches for the little envelope. It's not clipped to a cheap bit of plastic stuck into the vase, like every other flower arrangement Ben has come across in his lifetime (admittedly, not a very large sample) but is instead tied to the vase with a length of fine green ribbon.

In honor of your latest success, since I can't be there to congratulate you in person.

-G

Coming from anyone else, he might have found the message curiously cold, but the sheer novelty and sweetness of the gesture is more than enough for Ben. No one's ever sent him flowers before.

He gets a better look at them. They're not nearly so ostentatious as all of George's previous gifts might lead him to expect. No massive spray of identical roses or pristine orchids or anything so, well, obvious. It might even be considered modest: just a half-dozen sunflowers nestled between sprigs of green foliage and the bright blue blossoms that Ben recalls seeing by the side of the highway in summertime, but whose name he does not know. In fact, the arrangement has the slightly wild, haphazard look of a bouquet you pick during recess to press nervously into the hand of your schoolyard crush (an experience, and an anxiety, that Ben knows from having picked more than one himself.)

Of course, he doesn't doubt that the thing still probably cost an extraordinary amount. The vase, he suspects, is hand-turned clay, expertly glazed. The flowers themselves probably came from some hippy-dippy macrobiotic gluten-free farm that use some fancy biocompatible fertilizer that George probably finds *fascinating*. Ben snickers fondly to himself. Yes, that sounds right.

It's also a nice confirmation that George took the time to seek out and send them himself. Ben's had time enough to get to know George's eccentric EA and his tendency towards extravagance to be confident about that. Not like Ben would have thought George was staffing out these responsibilities anyway, but it was always nice to know for sure.

He moves the flowers to the teachers' lounge, ignoring all the questioning looks that he receives in the hall, from students and colleagues alike. But there's no way his next class won't be hopelessly distracted with wondering where they had come from, so he doesn't take the chance.

He stashes the vase in a corner, tacks on a sticky note asking any who pass by to please leave it be, and slumps down in a chair at one of the lunch tables. He's exhausted, yes, but undeniably...pleased.

He knows that George likes to keep things compartmentalized, to keep their lives at work and their lives together well-differentiated, and he's tried to do the same. But that doesn't mean that it isn't nice to have little reminders while he navigates the fluorescently-lit stage on which he lives his professional life, with all its attendant frustrations and disappointments. George has always belonged to a different world, one that seems, at least to Ben, free of the kind of helplessness with which he grapples every day. And sometimes it was easy to forget that that other world was real, that he could be a part of it, at least for a little while.

While he's working his way through these thoughts he notices an old newspaper, maybe a week or two out of date, scattered across the table top, the pages pulled apart as someone had hunted for the Sports section and the horoscope. Normally Ben would just leave it be. He's not in the habit of cleaning up after his colleagues. But he needs a distraction from this strange, fragile feeling coursing through him. So he starts to gather the pages together, his mind only half on the task, the rest of him decidedly elsewhere.

But then something catches his eye.

He's not one for reading obituaries. People who do so casually, he's always thought, were probably to be avoided. The ability to engage so casually in the deaths of strangers is not something he wants to possess for himself. But just by chance his eyes alight on the page and are held there by a half-familiar name.

Dr. Nathaniel Sackett, PhD

It's short. Painfully so. Nowhere does it mention the phrase "loving father" or "devoted husband." No family of his own to survive him, just an older sister out in Queens, who had evidently been the one who placed the notice. There are a few lines about his education and his scientific achievements, but nothing else. Curiously, no cause of death is listed anywhere.

At first Ben isn't even sure that this is the Nathaniel Sackett he knows of, the one George has mentioned offhand no more than three or four times. His connection with Continental is nowhere noted, and Ben might have thought this notice was for a different man entirely if certain details of the nature of his work did not align with what Ben had been told.

Ben sits back in his chair, frowning. Why hadn't George mentioned that his friend had passed away? And suddenly, from the sound of it? As far as he has been able to gather, the two men had been, if not close, at least on familiar terms. And George had trusted him, had made a point of saying so, which Ben knows is not a trivial thing.

He will wait, he decides, to bring it up until there's a lull in one of their normal conversations, if only because he doesn't want to waste the limited amount of time they have to talk lingering on such a morbid topic. But he also knows that there's no real way to introduce the subject without sounding at least a tad...accusatory. And that's not what he wants at all. It was entirely George's prerogative to tell or not tell him what went on in his life, but Ben likes to think (or at least he would have thought) that they had reached a point where he might lean on Ben for stuff like this.

Apparently he was wrong.

Chapter End Notes

Shhh yes I know Yale has their big invitational in the fall shhhh don't worry about it.

Chapter 16

(212)865-1524 9:18 AM

Ben -- I know this is somewhat unorthodox, but I'm going to be in NH this weekend and I was hoping we could meet for coffee. I have something quite urgent to talk to you about.

(212)865-1524 3:44 PM

Ben -- I absolutely understand your hesitation. I assure you, if it weren't so important I wouldn't come to you like this. But I think you really need to hear what I have to say.

(212)865-1524 7:23 PM

Ben -- I'm really at a loss as to what to do here. I don't know what I can say to reassure you that I'm on your side, but believe me, you'll be glad you heard me out.

Ben glances down at the latest notification flickering over his phone screen, and considers, for perhaps the tenth time, just deleting the whole string of messages. Two days they've been coming in, every few hours like clockwork. He's tried to call too, but Ben hasn't picked up.

He honestly has no idea what Arnold's objective could possibly be, what he could be hoping to achieve by reaching out like this. The first thought that had come into his mind had been rather crass -- immediately he'd wondered if Arnold wasn't seeking to make some revelation or ask some questions pertaining to some STD he'd picked up somewhere. But that's certainly not a conversation they're ever going to have. Ben hadn't required any prodding to get himself checked out back when everything between them had finally run its course, and everything had come up negative. Apparently he'd had good reason to be worried.

Unless it's something else. But Ben can't begin to guess what.

He's thought about telling George about the messages, if only to see if he might have any insights into his (former) colleague's motivations, or even just in the interest of full disclosure. But he hadn't said a word. He tells himself it's because he doesn't want George to have to concern himself with something so trivial, that he doesn't want to worry him. But if he's being honest with himself, he feels the slightest smidge of satisfaction at finally being the one with the secret, being the one with information to withhold. It reassures him; he doesn't need George's input on every little problem, doesn't need every little detail of his life to pass through George's ear.

It's petty, and it's childish. But it eases at least for a little while the lingering sting he feels at being kept in the dark about so much of George's own life. He can't deny that it feels good to even the score.

So he puts up with the infrequent ping that lets him know that Arnold has left yet another message. He can handle it.

He can.

It's the end of the day before George is due to return from LA, and Ben is summoned to Principal Sullivan's office.

For all that he ought to have grown out of it, and for all that he does have a fairly functional (if occasionally contentious) relationship with his boss, he can never quite shake the deep-down simmering anxiety that's always conjured up by the thought of being called to the principal's office. He's not sure he ever will.

"You wanted to see me?" he asks, sticking his head through the door.

"Ah, yes, Ben. Take a seat."

Ben does as he's told. It's not as though he doesn't like Sullivan, or doesn't respect him. He certainly does. But there's always been something in his manner that's just a little condescending, a little too overtly paternalistic, that always rubbed Ben the wrong way. Though, he supposes, that probably is just the nature of the job.

"First, let me congratulate you on the debate team's performance this past weekend. You must be very proud."

"They did the work, sir. We just steer the ship."

Sullivan waves off his humility like it's mosquito buzzing around his face.

"Be that as it may, it's still a great achievement."

"Thank you," Ben says graciously, though he's wondering when Sullivan will get to his point. As if on cue, Sullivan goes on.

"That's actually what I called you in to talk about today," he says. "It's about this list, the students who are eligible to compete in the national tournament?"

"The most we've ever had," Ben interjects. "By a long shot."

Sullivan's expression doesn't shift.

"Yes, well, be that as it may, we're going to have a slight problem funding this little...excursion. The tournament is in Salt Lake this year? That's not a cheap city to get to."

Ben blinks.

"We've been extremely conservative in our budgeting for this year," he points out. "The amount left over--"

"Will not be nearly enough to cover your costs, or pay the overtime for the third chaperone you're going to need to bring with you. I'm sorry, but you're going to have to make some decisions. Maybe, if there are two or three kids you think might have a shot at doing well, we can consider it. But more than a dozen students is beyond the realm of possibility."

Ben sputters, trying desperately to get a handle on the situation while keeping even-keeled about what he has to say next.

"But sir, we can't just arbitrarily choose a few and tell the rest they're not allowed to compete. They all qualified."

Sullivan merely shrugs.

"That's up to you. But I'm telling you, there's no way that this is going to happen. You can seek the funds from elsewhere if you like, but I wouldn't count on much coming your way by that line."

Ben's seeing red. Under the line of the desk, where Sullivan can't see them, his hands are balled into fists.

"If that was everything?" he asks, voice brittle.

"That was all," says Sullivan, already turning back to his computer screen. Ben sees himself out.

Ben could kick himself. It hadn't even crossed his mind that they wouldn't be able to afford the trip. An unconscionable lapse, considering the fact that he's always been the one to handle logistics, Nate being positively helpless in that department. But they'd had so much left over, after a season of attending only tournaments in their backyard, of bag lunches and parents eager to carpool. They'd hardly spent any of their money at all, in fact.

No matter, Ben thinks. He'll figure it out. He has to. The alternative hardly bore thinking about.

He tells Nate the bad news over drinks at their favorite bar in West Haven. He's less visibly upset than Ben had been, but just stares resignedly into his glass.

"You know," Nate says, after a little while, "I get that it's weird to ask, but if we can't figure out a solution in time, you don't think that maybe -- I mean, I'm sure he'd be happy to help, Geo--"

"Stop," says Ben icily. "Don't even think about it."

Nate raises his hands, almost like he might really need to fend Ben off.

"Alright, forget I said anything," he says, a little shrill. "I was just thinking out loud."

"Well don't," says Ben bitterly. "Don't even *consider* it."

"Okay," says Nate. "Okay. We'll figure something out."

"Yeah," says Ben, with more confidence than he feels.

He's not given too long to brood over his misfortunes, however. George flies in later that very same night, and for all that Ben would have thought he'd want nothing more than a relaxing weekend alone in his own apartment, he instead gets Ben's permission to take a car straight from JFK to Ben's door, still dressed in the clothes from his last morning meeting and looking uncharacteristically...wiped.

Ben's half-tempted to make a joke about how startlingly pathetic he looks -- dark circles under his red-rimmed eyes, hair mussed, easily-visible stubble. He'd kind of expected (and George had given him reason to expect) a rather dramatic reunion, but looking at him now, Ben's only agenda is to get him off his feet, fed, and put to bed.

He hauls George's suitcase up the stairs, ignoring his protests.

"I'm thinking pizza," he says, off-hand. "Do you want pizza? Did everything go okay with your flight? I know there were some weather delays in Chicago --" He rambles a bit in this vein, until George finally manages to get a word in edgewise.

"It was fine. It was all fine," George says. "I'm just glad to be home, in all honesty."

Ben doesn't realize what he's said until a beat passes, his mind already lost and running over their dinner order. *I'm just glad to be home.*

Don't overthink it, he tells himself. *He doesn't mean **home** home. He was just speaking...generally.*

But it's hard *not* to overthink it, when George rests a gentle hand on Ben's back as they climb the final flight of stairs, or when he lets out a contented, almost inaudible little sigh as Ben opens the door.

His expectations for anything even remotely energetic have gone basically out the window, but George still eases the suitcase out of Ben's grip once he closes the door, catching Ben's hand when he does so and drawing him into a slow, exhausted kiss while they're still standing right there in the front hallway. There's nothing in the embrace which promises any kind of forward progression -- it's just what it is. Ben can't deny that there's something freeing in that, in just being able to focus on just *this*, without any concern for what might come afterward.

Later, Ben steps out of his shower to see George sitting on his bed, thumbing through one of Ben's books. He's got on one of his own t-shirts, which Ben had actually pilfered from his place weeks ago and neglected to return, but for all that he looks like he's having trouble getting comfortable.

"Hey, budge up," he says, kneeling on the mattress and urging George to settle himself closer to the center of the bed. George reaches out, but Ben gently bats his hands away. "Turn over for me? On your front."

George huffs a little, but does as he's told. Unsurprisingly there's all kinds of tension evident in George's shoulders, the muscles of his upper back that Ben can feel under his hands. He digs in a little with his thumbs, right at the base of his neck, and George has to muffle a ragged moan, practically melting into the pillow.

"I had planned..." George protests, trailing off.

"Don't worry about it," says Ben, punctuating his statement with a kiss placed precisely between George's shoulder blades. "This is perfect."

"I did miss you," George insists, his voice startlingly open, unguarded. He must be more tired than Ben thought.

"I know you did," Ben assures him. It takes a moment for him to realize what's missing from that statement, and he throws it in, almost an afterthought. "I missed you too."

George submits to Ben's ministrations for a few minutes, but refuses to drift off like that, rolling over on to his back and pulling Ben down with him. They lie facing each other for a few minutes in companionable silence.

He hadn't spilled the beans on anything that had happened in California, or anything from before, but Ben's already feeling remorse over his choice to keep so many secrets. He wants to tell George everything, everything he knows, wants to comfort him over the death of his friend, wants to tell him about Arnold's ceaseless messages, his increasingly energetic attempts to make contact. But George is blinking up at him from the very edge of sleep, his expression exquisitely relaxed. He looks younger than Ben thinks he's ever seen him. And Ben doesn't want that expression to change, doesn't want to be responsible for shattering the perfect peace of this moment. It can wait.

"I'm glad you're here," he says, instead of everything else he wants to say, and George hums his

acknowledgement. Ben nestles closer against his chest, tightens his hold around him just a little. It can all wait.

Ben wakes up first, for what might well be the first time. At some point in the night he'd rolled onto his back, towards the edge of the bed. George is sprawled against the pillows, his breathing deep and even.

Ben slips from under the blankets as carefully as he can, glancing quickly at the alarm clock on the bedside table. They'd really slept in. It's nearly ten.

He's feeling the strange lethargy and the beginnings of the headache that always dog him whenever he sleeps for too long, so he pads into the kitchen, pulling his old grey hoodie from the back of a chair, and pours himself a glass of water. He thinks about what else he should be doing right now, maybe clearing the remains of last night's dinner, or bringing George's suitcase in from where they left it right by the front door. Instead he settles on starting up a pot of coffee, pulling two mugs from the cupboard and setting them out.

Something he had forgotten to ask was whether or not George was planning on staying for the whole weekend, or if he was going to head out sometime today. At some point, he's going to have to start working on a plan for paying for this trip, and he doesn't want to do it with George around. But on the other hand, the idea of a full day and night with his...whatever George is to him, was infinitely appealing.

And again Ben runs up against the problem of a label. It's a question that's had him stumped for weeks. Try as he might, he's still not sure what to call this thing that they've settled into. Referring to George as his "boyfriend" seems patently ridiculous. "Partner" has, he has to admit, a much nicer ring to it. But it bespeaks a level of commitment that he's not sure George is as interested in. Significant other? No. Lover? *Definitely* not. He makes a face just thinking about it.

While he's caught up in these musings, Ben figures he might as well find something useful to do. He's just peering into the fridge to see if he has enough to make George a decent breakfast, when there's a firm knock on the door.

Ben pauses. He's tempted to ignore it, but more like than not it's just one of his neighbors, probably the high-strung couple who live downstairs who always run out of coffee creamer, or have a habit of asking him weirdly detailed questions about the recycling. Better to head their knocking off now than risk waking George up. So he goes to the door.

It isn't Ben's neighbors.

And he should have known. He should have *known* that he wouldn't just give up, not when he'd already demonstrated such persistence. Ben knows him better than that.

He quickly gets over the shock of seeing Benedict Arnold standing in his doorway to notice that there's something decidedly *off* about his body language. He's folded in a little on himself, his head a little bowed, hands behind his back.

"Hi, Ben," he says, with a small, uncharacteristically tentative smile, his voice as quiet as Ben's ever heard it. "I know this has to come as a surprise, but may I come in?"

And Ben should say no. He doesn't have the desire, the energy, to deal with this. It is, objectively, a bad idea.

And yet. And *yet* -- he can't deny his own curiosity. It may well turn out to be nothing of actual

interest. It's probably just some sort of scam. But he has no reason to be afraid. He knows that now.

"Yeah," he says coolly, stepping aside to let Arnold through. "Fine."

"This won't take long, I promise," Arnold assures him.

"It better not," says Ben, voice flat.

Arnold hovers for a moment, apparently waiting for Ben to invite him to sit at the kitchen table or in the living room, but Ben does no such thing.

"How have you been?" Arnold says, just to break the tension, but Ben's not having it.

"We're not doing small talk, Benedict. You're going to say what you came here to say, and then you're going to leave."

The mild little smile that graces Arnold's handsome face flickers for a fraction of a second, but doesn't falter.

"Alright. I understand. I do. Can we sit, maybe?" he says, gesturing to the couch.

"No."

The shadow of an old anxiety falls over him at the change that comes into Arnold's posture, the hard angle of his shoulders, the tightening of his jaw, all things that always presaged some great outburst. He has to rein himself in. He's not going to learn what he wants to know if he over antagonizes the man. But the thought of saying anything conciliatory to soothe him leaves a bad taste in Ben's mouth.

"Fine," says Arnold. "I just wanted to warn you."

"About what?" says Ben, doing as best as he can to conceal his own overwhelming curiosity.

Arnold takes a moment, and Ben knows what he's doing, knows that he's being reeled in, and expertly. But all he can do is try to keep his face as expressionless as he can, and hope that Arnold gets to his point sooner rather than later.

"How are things," Arnold says at last, voice soft, "between you and George?"

Ben draws himself up, squares his shoulders.

"I don't see how that's any of your business."

Arnold lifts his hands, softens his posture.

"I know -- I understand -- but please, listen. Here's the thing. George has a bit of a...habit. I won't say a *reputation*, because he knows how to be discrete, as I'm sure you've discovered. Young guys: clean cut, smart mouths, *sparse* bank accounts. But it's a pattern with him."

Ben opens his mouth to respond, the sheer hypocrisy of the statement momentarily taking his breath away, but Arnold cuts him off at the pass.

"But that's not the point," he says in a rush. "I'm warning you about George because I don't want you to get caught up in what he's about to be involved in."

Ben lets out a bark of laughter, though he's beginning to feel the first shades of worry.

"How charitable of you," Ben sneers.

"I mean it. A lot of suspicious things have been happening, and people are starting to ask difficult questions. And I'm telling you, when it all comes to light, I don't want you getting in that kind of trouble."

Ben feels his breath go shallow. He wants Arnold out. He doesn't want to hear any more. But his instincts are urging him to keep Arnold talking, to let him reveal whatever cards he's keeping up his sleeve.

"What are you talking about?" he asks, his voice intentionally pitched high, worried.

"Do you know who Nathaniel Sackett is? Or, *was*, I should say," Arnold asks.

"George told me all about that," Ben says defensively.

"But did he tell you *how* it happened?"

Ben wants to say yes, doesn't want to admit that George had in fact kept this from him. Nor does he exactly trust Arnold to tell him the truth. But he's positively desperate to know.

He doesn't answer, and suffers the ugly, acid grin that blossoms over Arnold's face.

"So he didn't tell you he was murdered? In cold blood, on premises, with no security footage of the break-in? He didn't tell you that he was far more concerned with getting the cos to hush it up than he was with finding who did it?"

"That's a lie," Ben snaps, but Arnold's caught him flat-footed. He knows it too. He steps forward towards Ben, ready, apparently, to deliver the rhetorical coup de grace -- but then something catches his eye. George's suitcase, still settled in the corner. The expensive rollerboard stands out in Ben's flea-market living room like a sore thumb. His eyes dart into the kitchen, and Ben knows he's seeing the two mugs set out beside the full pot of coffee. Ben watches the realization come over him, and it may just be his imagination, but he thinks he can see him go just the tiniest bit pale.

"I think you should go," Ben says. Arnold looks like he's ready to bolt. But as always, he has to have the last word.

"Think about what I said," he hisses, now evidently being careful not to raise his voice lest he disturb the man sleeping behind the bedroom door. Then he goes.

Chapter 17

Ben barely resists the temptation to slam the door behind Arnold's retreating back, and clicks the deadbolt with a satisfying snap. He goes to the kitchen and tries to pour himself a cup of coffee, but his hand shakes so badly that he has to put the pot down.

Leaning back against the counter, he takes a few deep, settling breaths. Pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes, he pulls himself back from the edge of panic. He's fine, he thinks aggressively. He's *fine*.

Ben has no idea what he might have done if Arnold had tried something like this, showing up at his door unannounced, six months previously. It's very unlikely that it would have gone like *this*. He probably wouldn't have relentlessly hounded him to get to his point before unceremoniously kicking him out. No, it isn't Arnold's presence that's unsettling him.

The lingering energy of the confrontation. The old fear of his association with George being widely known and spoken of so derisively as just George's latest indulgence in this "habit", the latest iteration of a pattern. These are what distress him.

But he knows better than to take anything Arnold had told him with anything less than a heaping handful of salt. And whatever people might think, however it might appear from the outside looking in, Ben knows it's not like that. At least not anymore.

You still can't explain what it is, though, insists that ungovernable voice in the back of his mind.

"That doesn't matter," Ben says acidly, and it actually surprises him to realize he's even spoken out loud.

"What doesn't matter?" says a voice from the living room, and Ben jumps.

George stands in the center of the rug, looking mussed and still very jet-lagged, but alert. How much had he heard? Immediately, Ben's mind casts about for a solution to this new problem, something to say to throw George off, to placate him.

But he's exhausted. He's so fucking tired. And whatever justifications he had crafted for himself to ease the guilt of lying to George before now, they no longer have the power to convince him.

"I heard voices," George says. "Was someone here?"

"Yes," Ben admits, resigned now to face the eventual fate of this conversation. "It was Benedict. He, uh, he just left."

George's expression doesn't change, but Ben thinks he sees a little brittleness come into the lines of his mouth, his jaw tightening.

"I wasn't aware that you two had been talking," George says, and Ben flinches, recognizing suddenly how this must look. It's his own fault, he knows that. He hasn't told George much, hasn't told him nearly enough about how things had been with Arnold. But the thought of volunteering that information had been, still is, almost unbearable. If George asks, he will answer, but not before.

"We haven't been," Ben says, doing his level best not to sound defensive. "He...he reached out about a week ago. Just said that he was going to be in town, and that he had something he wanted

to tell me."

George frowns.

"And what was that?" George asks, very carefully.

Out with it, Tallmadge. Enough of this.

"He said he wanted me to know how Nathaniel Sackett died."

George blanches.

"What did he say?" he asks, visibly holding himself back from stepping into Ben's space, his voice just skirting the edge of panicked. "What, specifically?"

"Just that it happened at Continental. That it was...violent." *That it was most probably an inside job. That you had it covered it up. That you lied to me. That you're lying to me right now.*

George's face contorts in a grimace of frustration. He does move forward now, looking at Ben very intently, grasping him by the upper arms with ruthlessly-restrained force.

"Please, Ben, I need you to try. What were his *exact* words?"

His question reverberate in Ben's head, interweaving with his own insistent inner monologue, both exhorting him to do the same thing. *The truth, Ben.*

"He said...that the police agreed not to go public with their investigation. That you told them not to."

George shakes his head, but Ben can't be sure whether it's a direct denial of Ben's statement, or just the fact that they've found themselves in this situation -- that he can't believe he's been found out.

Ben keeps going.

"I know he was your friend, George. Why didn't you tell me? I could have--" *You could have what? Could have helped him? Could have given him someone to talk to? Could have been an accomplice?*

"I didn't want to concern you," George says. "And I didn't want -- it was complex, as you've said. Legally, and--"

"George, I'm not a reporter. I'm not a cop. I wouldn't have said anything to anybody. Why couldn't you *tell* me?"

But by now George has fully regained mastery over himself. The ragged, anguished look that had crossed his face has been neatly and efficiently put away, replaced with one of simple, sober apology.

"You're right," he says shortly. "You're right, I should have told you. I'm sorry."

Ben bites his lip, looks away. The way George backs away from the conversation so completely, offering no justifications, making no explanations? It sets off a dozen different alarm bells in Ben's head. He has to know *why* -- it's the only thing that matters now, the only piece of the puzzle he feels that he's missing.

But he has George's apology, and for all that it isn't what he wants, it's better than nothing.

"Okay," he says, on a long exhale. "It's okay. I understand."

A tense silence descends over the room like a bell jar; Ben feels almost as though the air around them is growing thin as he's filled with a sudden uncertainty. *What happens now?*

"I can see myself to the train station," George says, "I can understand if you would prefer to have the rest of the weekend to yourself, to...think."

Ben's stomach drops. He knows what follows if he lets George leave now. He can see the path, the inevitable ending all laid out before them, and he acts reflexively.

"Stay. Please. At least until tomorrow. If that's alright?" *I mean it. I want you here. Please don't go, not like this.*

"Okay," says George. "I can stay." Ben breathes out, the twisted feeling in his gut beginning to fade. It's fine. They're going to be fine.

The rest of the day passes in a lazy haze. George defers to Ben to come up with their plans, and one look out at the cold, damp, grey March morning and whatever little energy Ben might have had to be active and enterprising is swept away.

They drink their coffee. He does a little haphazard grading while George reads the news. Eventually they make it out of the apartment for a little while for a lackluster workout at Ben's gym and a stop at the grocery store, but they're not in any hurry.

George cooks him dinner while Ben's in the shower: just pasta with some jarred tomato sauce out of his cupboard and meatballs from the freezer, but it's warm and it's familiar. They break out a bottle of something, but neither of them feel much like drinking. Ben, for himself, already feels more off-balance than he'd like.

George is normally weirdly insistent about eating at the table, but he follows Ben's lead tonight. They sit on the sofa with their bowls between their knees as Ben flicks through the channels for a basketball game to leave on in the background, and George clears his throat.

"We haven't really talked about how your week went," he prompts, and Ben looks over at him.

"There's not much to talk about," he begins, but catches himself. "Actually, yesterday was kind of a bummer."

"Why is that?"

Ben sighs, starts in on the story of his meeting with Sullivan, his fears that he won't be able to find a way to raise the money in time.

"Admittedly a few more students qualified than anybody expected, but it was such a good opportunity, I just thought we'd be able to get a little more support," he concludes. There's a pause.

"How much do you think you will need?" George asks, his tone deceptively light. Ben looks up, gaze sharp.

"Don't worry about it," he says, voice a little too loud.

"Ben-"

"No, I know what you're thinking. But I have it under control. I do. I just needed to vent for a bit. I

don't need your help."

George's face takes on a pinched, pained expression. It's with evident effort that he eventually cedes the field to Ben.

"Alright. But you know if there's anything you need-"

Ben flinches.

"Yeah, I know."

"Okay."

They lapse back into silence. Ben turns back to face the screen, takes a bite of his pasta. Eventually he finds it in himself to relax sufficiently to let George drape an arm around his shoulders. Ben tucks his feet underneath himself, leans in a little. George's other hand drops absently to Ben's knee. Ben presses a distracted kiss to the underside of George's jaw.

The minutes pass, the game ends and the channel cuts to highlights, but they're no longer paying attention. Ben's got his knees pressed into the couch cushions on either side of George's lap, his arms twined around George's neck while George drags his mouth over Ben's throat, teeth scraping over Ben's Adam's apple. Ben cards his fingers through George's short hair, wishing it were long enough to get a proper hold of and relishing the scrape of George's two-day stubble over his pulse point. He grinds down, just a little, and George stifles a gasp, pulls away. Gently, he pushes Ben up off his lap, picks himself up off the couch.

"Bed?" Ben asks.

George nods.

It sometimes feels, to Ben, like there's a certain inevitability about it. He can't say exactly where the event horizon is and when they cross it, but he can recognize the feeling of being drawn into the singularity of George's desire and attention, by now as familiar and comforting as slipping into a warm bath.

But George still manages to throw him a curveball.

He gets Ben out of his clothes, gets him on the bed. Ben moves to lay himself out like he knows George likes him, but he's held back with a firm hand on his shoulder. George rifles around in the nightstand for a moment, then presses the bottle of lube into Ben's hand, which is nearly enough on its own to tell Ben what he wants.

In all the times they've been together, George has almost never asked Ben to take care of this part himself. He's said before that he relishes the chance to get Ben prepped, the chance to take his time, to gauge for himself how ready he is. And for his part, Ben is grateful to have the check on his own impatience, his own tendency to want to rush to the inevitable conclusion of things, and not keep George waiting. It's just how they operate now. This, then, is not just a throwaway gesture.

"Are you sure?" Ben asks, weighing the bottle in his hand.

"I thought about it the whole time I was away," George says, with all the gravity of a formal confession. Ben tries but fails to stay silent, letting out a bitten-off sound somewhere between a moan and a whine.

They'd done this before, just once, on what had been just another weekend. George had had to coax him into it, assure him at every turn that it was what he wanted, that he wanted Ben to feel good, wanted him to feel what George felt whenever he had Ben around him, hot and tight and perfect. Ben had gotten the impression that it's not an easy thing for him to ask for, Ben hadn't counted on having the chance again, certainly not so soon.

But he hesitates. He's not sure why, but he's unsettled. There's still too much of the morning's apology in George's face, too much residual tension crackling in the air between them for Ben to be entirely sure... *Too ill-advised, too sudden* his mind supplies.

But George asked for it, he wouldn't have done if it wasn't what he wanted. Ben can't refuse him, doesn't *want* to refuse him. Ben wants to make it good, wants to hear that it's all George had imagined, alone in that unrelenting series of sterile hotel rooms, wants George to know how much Ben missed him.

George is watching him, waiting for his answer. Ben breathes out his enduring self-consciousness at being the focus of George's complete attention, somehow magnified now that their normal roles are reversed.

"Yeah," he says, on an exhale. "Yeah, I'd like that."

He takes first things first. He goes to lots of trouble to get George comfortable, cognizant as he is of the ache in his back that's attendant on spending so long in an airplane and sleeping a night on Ben's cheap mattress. Ben gathers most of the pillows behind him, slipping one under his hips and letting him settle in. He pushes George's hands, palm down, onto the sheets.

"Keep them there," he says, trying his best to sound firm. George quirks an eyebrow, but complies in silence. Ben gives him another little order, tells him to spread his legs, plant his feet, and he savors the little spark of triumph he feels when George immediately does as he's told.

And Ben takes his time.

It's much easier, he thinks, to be patient when he's on this end of things. It's a paramount pleasure of its own just to catalogue all of George's subtle responses, the little cues he gives when Ben finds a good spot, sets a good pace. It's never much: a hitch in his breath, his eyes fluttering closed for a second, but it's a code that Ben's been learning to read for months now. He likes to imagine himself at least fairly proficient.

As it is, George is languid and loose by the time Ben pronounces himself satisfied. He nods breathlessly when Ben asks if he's ready, and Ben reaches for the condom box in the nightstand. But it's empty.

Ben bites back a curse. It's not the end of the world, he has more in the bathroom, but the thought of having to get out of bed to fetch them isn't an appealing one. Well, he thinks, the sooner he does it, the sooner he can be back.

He moves to slip off the edge of the bed, but George, ignoring his previous orders, reaches out to grab his wrist.

"Leave it," he says, breathless. "Don't worry about it. We're fine."

Ben freezes. *What?*

"It'll just be a second," Ben promises, but George doesn't let go.

"You don't have to," George insists, his voice stronger now. "If you'd rather go without..."

Ben's entirely taken aback. Apart from the briefest of throwaway statements, just clipped confirmations from each of them that they'd had themselves checked out, that neither of them were carrying anything, this isn't a possibility they've ever discussed. Ben himself would have never dared to bring it up. He's never asked about it, but doing the math and realizing that George would have been having his own sexual awakening smack in the middle of the eighties told Ben all that he needs to know. If George is paranoid about protection, Ben can't possibly blame him. And it's not as though he's had any complaints.

He knows this is a step, a big one. He ought to be pleased. But there's something in George's expression he does not like, a desperation in his grip that makes Ben far more afraid than excited. Gently, he pries George's hand away, and leans in for a patient kiss.

"Just one second," he says, and darts away.

He's efficient about it when he returns, eager not to keep George waiting. And it's *good*, even better than the first time. He has to lean down and rest his forehead against George's shoulder for a moment as he first slides home, momentarily overwhelmed. George's hand is like a brand at the small of his back, egging him on.

Ben turns himself to his task, his objective as clear as a summer sky, resonating like a mantra in his head as he moves. *Make it good, make it good for him, make it as good for him as it is for you.*

Afterward they roll apart and lie on their separate sides of the bed, sweat cooling on Ben's skin. George lingers there for a while, in silence, but rises to take a shower before too long, and Ben is left there, wondering what just happened.

He listens to the water run as George takes his customary briskly efficient two-minute shower, debates the merits of just curling up under the covers and pretending to fall asleep, but quickly dismisses that idea. They've made progress today. He doesn't want to negate that now.

So when George comes back he's wide-awake and waiting for him, pulls back a corner of the covers in invitation. Ben shifts backwards into the circle of his arms.

"I'm sorry about earlier," George mutters after a few moments, tightening his hold. Ben hums in response, less of a question about George's meaning and more of a request to continue.

"I didn't mean to spring the idea on you," George goes on. "I was...caught up in the moment."

Ben suspects that's bullshit, but he accepts the soft kiss George presses to his temple nonetheless. It's not really a big deal, he thinks. They can talk about it later.

They have time.

Chapter 18

Ben wakes up, and it's like the world has been made new again.

The ugly, dreary cloud cover of the day before has yielded to a clear winter sky, and rays of weak morning sunlight dart through the blinds into Ben's bedroom.

He's sometimes been a little put off by the logistics of sharing his bed with another person, but this morning everything's just...worked itself out. There's no weird crick in his neck or numbness in his arms from the way he fell asleep tucked up against George's side, as there so often is. His head rests on George's chest, its gentle rise-and-fall reminding Ben of being on a boat on a calm sea. It's almost enough to lull him to sleep again, but he stirs himself into wakefulness.

He slides out from under the covers as best he can without jostling George, pulls on his boxers and some sweats. He brushes his teeth while considering the merits of running out for coffee. If he goes, he can pick up a newspaper or two for George while he's out, and that thought is enough to overcome his powerful desire to laze around and wait for George to wake up.

The day is unseasonably warm, the air threaded through with a new green smell that spurs him to breathe deep lungfuls, and he feels his whole mood lift. His step feels lighter, the distance from his place to Blue State is no distance at all. He picks up two coffees, the Times, and the Journal, but he doesn't hurry home.

George is still asleep when he gets back, and Ben stands in the bedroom door for a while, just looking at him. He hadn't dressed again last night after his shower, just fell into bed beside Ben in just his towel, and that had gotten kicked to the floor sometime in the intervening hours.

The morning light doesn't exactly suit him. It's too harsh, too direct, does nothing to mask the evidence of his age, but Ben still feels an overwhelming affection well up in his chest at the sight of him. He'd begun to forget, these past few weeks, how much he liked having George in his space, in his room, tangled up in his sheets. It had never been a frequent occurrence, and Ben had tried not to think too much about it, assuming as he did that George would soon tire of the novelty of Ben's little pre-war walk-up with its thrift store furniture and crappy mattress. But that hadn't happened, not yet at least.

He gets back into bed, sitting up against his headboard, scrolling through his news app and sipping at his coffee as he waits for George to wake up. It doesn't take long.

"Morning," George rumbles from the other side of the bed.

"Good morning," says Ben. George turns himself over, blinks up at him, his eyes adjusting to the light. It's too early for him to have gathered the self-possession required to govern his own expressions as he usually does, so the little frown that descends over his features is undeniably perplexed, almost petulant.

"You seem like you're in a good mood," he says, warily.

"Yeah," says Ben, leaning over to steal a kiss. "I really am."

"Any particular reason?"

"Not really."

They laze around in bed for a lot longer than Ben expects them to. George reads aloud from the paper when he comes across an article that he thinks Ben might take an interest in, and Ben feels himself become, paradoxically, both more relaxed and more awake as he settles further into the mattress and his coffee is given time to work. And yet, his mind doesn't quite let him alone. Something nags at him, like he's forgotten to do something important, pay a bill or call his mother. And then it strikes him.

There's a lapse as George silently takes in the update on the commodities market printed on the back page, and Ben braces himself to speak.

"So, yesterday," he begins, as George lowers the page. "I kind of thought, after what happened, I should explain a few things."

George fixes him with a strange, sharp look.

"You don't have to do that."

"I want to. Look, I know what that had to have looked like. Him showing up unannounced on a Saturday morning? And I know, I *know* -" he asserts, lifting a hand to cut off whatever George is about to say, "that you trust me. But I want you to have a reason to trust me. I'm not interested in testing you."

George tenses, and Ben briefly considers walking back, retreating to safer rhetorical ground. But he's not sure when he'll be able to gather the courage to do this a second time.

"Then I'm listening," says George. And that's all the impetus Ben needs.

"I mentioned that it didn't exactly end amicably between us," he begins. "But it was more than that. You know how in the moment, you might not have the best handle on a situation? And honestly, I could hardly even make myself think about it. But in retrospect, it was actually really bad, what was going on."

Ben goes on, his eyes fixed on the far wall so that he will not have to look at George's face, meet his eyes.

"And I'm beyond it, for the most part. I really am. And there's a lot that I probably could have done differently. I'm not trying to shirk responsibility for how things went. But it was, god, it was awful. And I didn't know any better, didn't know what I know now. I just hope you won't be upset that it took me so long to tell you."

And so he commences, if not a complete account of what had transpired between himself and Arnold, a story sufficient to answer many of George's unasked questions. The parts he omits (and there are more than a few,) he only leaves out because Ben knows that if he were to attempt to talk about them, he would only freeze, and be able to go no further. He sticks to what he can reasonably get through.

And George does not interrupt, not even to ask questions or seek clarification. He just listens, his eyes intent on Ben's face even after Ben can no longer bring himself to meet his gaze.

Ben finishes in a rush: the gradual cooling of Arnold's behavior, the cheating, their final, terrible fight all poured out in a torrent. When he's done, he feels like he's just run a mile. His heart is pounding, a bead of sweat trickles from his hairline down his temple. He doesn't want to look at George, but he knows that now he must.

"So that's it," he concludes, half-breathless. "That's what happened. And that's why, you know, you

don't have to be worried."

George doesn't speak for several agonizing moments, but when he does his voice is rough, stiff.

"Thank you for telling me this."

Ben bites his lip.

"I don't say it to, I don't know, dump all my baggage on you. That's not the point. It's just, you should know. You should have known sooner."

"I understand," says George. And Ben really thinks he does.

They sit for a few more minutes in an increasingly-comfortable silence, and it's only once Ben finally stirs himself from bed for a second time that George gets out what's on his mind.

"So, Benedict's wedding? I can guess why they invited you, but why did you go? If you don't mind my asking."

"Not at all," Ben says with a shrug. "I guess -- I was past it, like I told you. And I figured the food would probably be pretty good," he concludes with a smile.

George smiles back.

The upside of having whiled away the weekend at Ben's was that the to-do list that awaits George on his return to work the next day is so daunting, he doesn't even have time to be distracted by worry or the raw memories of Ben's confession, which had done their best to haunt him the whole of the previous night.

And that's certainly for the best. Because for all his gratitude at having Ben finally trust him enough to open up to him in such a way, he knows perfectly well that the version of the story he'd received had likely been carefully calculated *not* to alarm him. And in the resulting negative spaces, where some detail or harsh word had been omitted, he can't help but imagine monstrous things.

But there's no time for such preoccupations now, not when he has four meetings before lunch and a whole new set of problems to solve. He knows that in his absence there has been a great deal of movement in the campaign among certain factions to seek his ouster. He'd anticipated as much, in fact had been partly motivated to stay away so long just so the conspiracy could be given room to maneuver and progress, tired as he was of waiting to act. But just because he feels the tides are turning in his direction, that doesn't mean it's any less of a pain to deal with.

He'd schmoozed already with several of the board members reported by Laurens and Knox to be on the fence, and is hopeful that he's made some headway, or at least learned a good many useful things, but he's already working on diminished reserves when he nearly collides headlong in the corridor with a very flustered Benedict Arnold.

Arnold blinks up at him from inches away, and George is mildly pleased to see the flicker of fear that passes over his face before he regains his composure. He can readily anticipate Arnold's plan, to make some excuse about why he has no time to talk, but George moves swiftly to nip that in the bud. He settles himself as if by accident right in the center of Arnold's path, loosens the line of his shoulders, tries to look friendly and relaxed.

"Benedict. I hadn't expected to see you here. How have you been?"

"Well, it's been a busy few weeks," Arnold counters, his smile tight and close-lipped. "For you in particular. If you would excuse-"

"I heard," George all but booms, deciding that he ought to come right to the point, "that you had the chance to return to Connecticut over the weekend."

"A family obligation," Arnold says hastily.

"You had time to pay some visits to some old friends, though, didn't you? As I understand it."

Arnold doesn't falter, and the confidence with which he lies sets George's blood to boiling.

"I didn't have the pleasure," he says. "Too much to do, unfortunately."

"What a shame," says George, without intonation. And he wants to be plain about it, wants to tell Arnold that if he so much as attempts to contact Ben again, George will personally see to it that he suffers the consequences. But he knows that escalation will only play into the hands of those opposing him. And it won't do anything to help Ben.

"That is unfortunate," he says, instead of what he *wants* to say. "Though, probably for the best."

"Is that so?" asks Arnold, now smiling just a little, eyes clear. He draws himself up to his full height, until he and George are very nearly eye-to-eye.

"In fact," George goes on, "I would strongly suggest you not attempt to contact these *friends* again. Indefinitely. I won't speculate on what might happen if you do."

He takes a beat, lets his words hang in the air for a moment.

"Have I made myself clear?" he says, voice almost too low to be audible.

Arnold does not back away or drop his gaze, as George expects him to do.

"Oh, I think so," says Arnold, lightly. Then he leans in, until he too is barely speaking above a whisper.

"If it helps, to cast yourself as his benevolent protector, that's fine. If that's what you need to feel better about yourself. But don't pretend that your motivations are any more noble than mine. If you want to drag him down with you, that's up to you. But don't pretend that I'm responsible. Great catching up with you."

That last sentence he says in his customarily booming baritone, pulling away and casting a coolly assessing glance at the groups of office workers coming down the corridor. As George watches, momentarily stunned into stillness, he strides towards the elevators and disappears behind shining stainless-steel doors.

The journey back to his office is a blur, a blind red haze, his simmering anger threatening to boil over into the space around him. He paces back and forth across the carpet in the center of the room, ruthlessly forcing down the instinct to rush out the door, to find Arnold and make him pay, make him confess the true extent to which Ben had been mistreated, to do it *now*. He slams his open palm against the surface of the desk, incapable of keeping still, but the spark of sudden violence doesn't do any good, just throws fuel on the slow-smoldering fire of his rage.

Surely he wouldn't be so affected by the accusation, he thinks, if there was no truth in it. *Don't pretend your motivations are any more noble than mine.* The words gnaw at him, but it's only an

old anxiety that they latch onto, one that he's turned over in his mind too many times to count.

Of course it's different, he thinks to himself. *You just want to see him taken care of. That is your priority -- has been your priority for months.*

It's not a lie. He knows himself well enough to be sure of that. But it's not enough to set him fully at his ease.

With a ragged sigh, he pulls his phone from his pocket, his thumbs hovering, indecisive, over the screen. He holds himself still, ready to key in Ben's number, desperate to hear his voice.

But it's the middle of the day. Ben will be in the midst of his fourth period class by now, and none-too-pleased to be interrupted for anything less than a genuine emergency. This scarcely qualifies.

He practically throws his phone down onto the desk, then turns to face the window. Worst of all is the overwhelming feeling of helplessness. He can't call, he can't seek retribution, can't go back in time and offer comfort when Ben had actually needed it from him. He hardly needs it now.

Of course he's glad that Ben should have made such progress, but the fact that he had done so much of the work on his own frankly made George furious at himself, made him ache to do penance. He had to do something. *Anything.*

He pauses. There is, in fact, something that he can do, something Ben needs that he can give, right this very moment, though he's too proud to ask for it. Something that will cost him hardly anything at all, but could make a world of difference. He understands Ben's reticence to request it of him, he more than understands. But just because his objection is comprehensible, that doesn't mean it's rational.

No longer bereft of a clear way forward, he turns on his heel towards his desk and picks up the phone.

"Come in, Tallmadge."

Ben can feel the tension in the air as he enters Sullivan's office, even as he's undoubtedly distracted. He's been ceaselessly consumed by the problem of where to come up with the money to get to Nationals, practically since George walked out his door two days ago. Both he and Nate have been applying their not-inconsiderable problem solving skills to resolving the issue, and had so far come up with precisely nothing. The deadline to register is coming up swiftly, Nate's been tracking flight prices with increasing anxiety, and they're starting to get genuinely desperate.

The last thing he needs is to have his time wasted by this meeting, as he has no doubt it will be.

He settles himself into the chair across the expanse of Sullivan's desk, doing his best to conceal his self-evident annoyance, but Sullivan doesn't give him long to ruminate over what might be at issue. Wordlessly, he slides an open envelope across the desk in Ben's direction, and gestures for him to open it.

Ben's eyes go wide the moment he gets his first look at the contents. He turns back to his boss, and is met with Sullivan's cold, ruthless expression and a one-word command.

"Explain."

When Ben walks out to his car an hour later, he feels curiously calm. Far calmer, at least, than he

probably ought to feel under the circumstances. His mind is astonishingly clear, his path forward perfectly evident. He takes a deep breath, lets it out in a long, slow stream.

He shouldn't be feeling like this, he thinks distantly. He should be in a rage, should be wringing his hands and wracked with indecision and so much else besides. Instead, he feels...nothing.

He gets into his car, not at all keen to do what he must do now out in the open where anyone might hear him. He glances at his watch: it's too early, hardly 4:30. But he has to do this now. It's not even that he fears putting the moment off will give him an excuse to change his mind, it's that he simply *cannot* put it off. His mind and body move as though on autopilot, like the painted figure on a puppet stage that is drawn inexorably forward, incapable of subverting the story's inevitable ending.

He dials George. It takes only two rings for him to answer, and when he does he sounds not at all like he's been interrupted in the midst of important business. Just glad to hear Ben's voice.

"Ben? Is everything alright?" George asks. Ben's never called him so early in the day before, never *dared* to encroach upon his work hours in this way. But he doesn't care.

"No. It's not," says Ben, without preamble or prevarication. "George, I need to know why you sent that money when I very clearly told you not to?"

He can picture it in his head; George's innocent expression, the genuine astonishment seeping through the cracks in that marble facade. Ben's gotten so, so very good at this, he doesn't even need to see his face anymore. He'd been proud of the skill, in fact. Before.

"Let me explain--"

"No," says Ben again, with more authority than he has probably ever spoken with in his life. "I don't need you to explain. I need you to listen. Did you consider what it would look like, dropping that amount of money into the lap of a school like this? For no apparent reason? This isn't fucking Phillips Exeter, George. We don't get massive donations for no reason at all. No amount of money this large moves around in a neighborhood like this without someone getting suspicious. More money, by the way, than we could have possibly needed. Do you even know what plane tickets cost?"

He has to take a breath, but he hastens forward lest George seize on the brief pause to try and come to his own defense. Ben will not let him. It could not possibly matter any less, what George has to say for himself.

"I had to tell them where the money came from. And I had to tell them who you were, and how I knew you."

"Ben, I understand that you're upset, but--"

"I'm not *out* at work, George. Or I wasn't. Until half an hour ago."

George's sharp inhale is perfectly audible from the other end of the line. Ben lets his words hang there for a moment, lets their impact sink in, before he continues.

"Do you understand now? I could have lost my job. I could *still* lose my job."

"Ben, I swear--"

"I have to go home and work the rest of this out," Ben snaps, suddenly needing this conversation to

be over. "Don't call me."

" *Ben--* "

"Don't call me."

Chapter 19

When George was eleven, Lawrence had showed him how to change the oil on their dad's old C/K 10. He had guided George's hands as they worked under the hood of the pickup, conscientiously explaining which of the myriad tubes and belts and tanks he needed to look out for, which would be good to learn for later, and which he needn't trouble himself with.

The memory had stuck with him with technicolor clarity: the two of them in the garage on a chill, rainy April day, grease stains on George's knuckles, cold metal under his hands. It's not hard to guess why that moment and that recollection should be so important to him: just as with so much of George's interior life, there's nothing of mystery in it. It had been the day of their father's funeral.

After all the other mourners had left and they had nothing to show for their sympathy but the remains of three huge trays of sandwiches sitting on their kitchen table, George had retreated to his room, wringing his hands, not sure of what he was supposed to be doing and too afraid to face his mother's grief. He'd sat there, listless, on the edge of his bed, until Lawrence came to him and told him in no uncertain terms that they were going to work on the car.

And just like that, he had his feet under him again. He had a path, a goal, an object on which to project his focus. It had meant everything to him. And when, shortly afterward, Lawrence had decided that he would stay in Virginia, get a job at the Pentagon and settle in somewhere close by with his fiancée, George had been over the moon.

It had seemed to him a thoroughly unequal trade: losing a distant and demanding father, and regaining a brother who had done more to equip him to make his way in the world than either of his proper parents ever had. One who occupied an entirely different world, who could tell George stories of his time in the service, of the things he had seen that stretched the bounds of George's comprehension and belief, that filled his dreams with images of open oceans and bustling foreign cities and tropical landscapes.

Lawrence had taught him everything: how to whistle, how to shoot, how to throw a fastball. He taught him how to do up his football pads when he was finally old enough to start playing for real. When he was around, he was a far far better resource than his mother when he was struggling with his high school English homework.

It was Lawrence that he called when he needed someone to vent to when he couldn't manage to keep a girlfriend longer than it took for them to get through a couple of disappointing dates. He'd been loath to ask for advice, but he'd quickly come to the end of his rope, convinced it was something he was doing wrong, positive that the feeling of cold dread that knotted itself in his stomach when he sat in a dark parking lot with Sally Fairfax in his passenger seat was nothing but a product of his own inability to just do the damn thing properly.

In fact, he'd been remarkably patient through George's girl troubles. It had never seemed to matter much to him, not the way it mattered to George's mother, who had often fixed him with a look that made him feel like he was under an X-ray machine. He never dared to ask what she saw when she did this, what her maternal instincts gleaned through such focused observation, but he can't imagine it was anything good.

When George made the decision, with Lawrence's help, to follow his lead and enlist after graduation, they had driven out in the old truck, through the suburbs, up the river to the falls. They

sat on the tailgate with a pack of lukewarm beers, and Lawrence told him how proud he was, how certain that he would find success. And he finally felt it, for the first time, what Lawrence had been assuring him he would do all along. He could escape, could make something of himself. Could be valuable, and valued. George was sure there could be no greater happiness.

He can't help but wonder how Lawrence might advise him now.

He can feel the curtain slowly beginning to fall, can feel this last act drawing to a close. He had thought only to make his last move once he had solved all the lingering mysteries: the stolen project, the unfortunate Dr. Sackett. But he may not have the luxury of time. He's accepted, at last, that he might just have to let it all go.

A month ago that thought would have been unbearable, untenable. But a lot of things had been different a month ago. A month ago, he had still felt confident in his ability to keep his job so long as it served him to keep it. A month ago, Ben had still been in his life.

It had only been by great force of will that George had restrained himself from breaking Ben's interdiction, and not contacted him as Ben had requested. But he'd done it. He had stayed away. And now, of course, he has to wonder if he had done wrong. But with every day that passed, it felt more and more like it was too late.

His days take on a new cast, without Ben around to occupy his due measure of George's time. He isn't idle, by any means. He works out more, spends more evenings with friends, gets more work done.

He reads less. Every book he picks up, he cannot help but wonder what Ben's take on it would be, how he might put the work into context by setting against his vast and often inexplicable base of knowledge. Or if it's something he could be sure Ben would like or be interested in, he can never help but imagine reading it to him as Ben lounges in bed or lies sprawled over top of him as they both sit on the couch.

He'd capitulated more easily than he had thought he would, frankly. But that had always been one of Ben's outstanding talents: to constantly surprise him, and to get him to constantly surprise himself.

In fact the entire event had been a surprise. Their rupture had been so sudden, had blindsided him so fully. It had never happened to George that way before. He'd never known it *could* happen that way. He'd always been able to read the writing on the wall, to bow out as gracefully as he could before the inevitable end.

He'd genuinely thought they had been doing well, or at least doing better. That preceding weekend that they had spent ensconced in Ben's apartment, with no other concerns or obligations but getting over his minor jet lag, George had felt so close to him.

He's thought about what he would say in his own defense, if given the opportunity. He's thought about how he could apologize, *properly* apologize, and explain himself, explain that he hadn't kept Ben in the dark because he didn't trust him with the knowledge or didn't value his counsel, but because he had been terribly, gut-wrenchingly afraid for him. Because it would have meant putting him in physical danger, and he loved Ben far too much to bear that prospect.

Yes, there was a lot he wished he'd had the courage to say.

But he understands, objectively, that he isn't the only one at fault. Of course he sees his own error, but that doesn't erase his own lingering frustration over the fact that Ben was going to let himself,

let his students, suffer needlessly when there was a ready solution to hand.

One thing he does not do is check if the amount specified in the check he had sent was actually withdrawn from the associated account -- either Ben didn't cash it, and this whole thing was for nothing, or he did, and his humiliation was only deepened such that George no longer knows how this problem might ever be resolved. But it's probably safe to assume that he did, since George does not possess the willpower not to read up on the news from the speech tournament.

It's all he's seen of Ben since: one photograph, printed in a New Haven local, with Ben standing to one side of a pack of twelve beaming teenagers in secondhand blazers. George had thought he looked a little drawn, though he was smiling as widely as the rest of them. It was probably just wishful thinking, that ugly human need to know that Ben had been as affected by their separation as George himself had been. He had no reason to believe that it was true, and less reason to *hope* it was. But it doesn't change the fact, and it doesn't make him feel any better. It's just what it is.

Henry Laurens had announced to him his plans to step down from the chairmanship one week after he had returned from California. George hadn't bothered trying to convince him to stay on. He knew it wouldn't have made even the slightest difference, his reasons for wishing him to keep the post were entirely selfish, and they both knew it.

They'd sat in his office for a long time afterward, nursing drinks in silence.

"I don't know what cards you still have up your sleeve, George," Laurens had said, in that gruff way he had. "But you're probably going to have to play them soon."

George has to agree. He doesn't know quite when his plan had slipped off the rails, but something tells him that it's not the only thing that's been overturned during his brief lapse in attentiveness. He cares much less about it than he thought he would.

But if he's going to have to act, there's no point in hesitating. He tells Laurens his intentions, the next step he's been contemplating for a long time: to sell his share of Continental to a group out of Boston, take the earnings and do something halfway decent with them. It had probably been overkill to hold their preliminary discussions all the way out at their California branch, but his paranoia had paid off in the past, and he at least feels like he's managed to keep the secret adequately. He'd given eight years of his life to this company. He doesn't feel the need to give any more.

Left unsaid is how much he had been looking forward to sharing this news with Ben, who would understand at once that what he was talking about was nothing like retirement, though that may have been how it appeared at first glance. But he had been so certain that Ben would have excellent insight into how he might dedicate his time and energy in the future. Never mind that it would have freed him to leave the city he had grown so tired of, freed him to live...wherever he might choose.

Yes, he'd been looking forward to having that conversation with Ben very much.

Henry leans back in his chair when George delivers the news, looking contemplative.

"You're quite sure about this?" Henry asks after a long considerate pause.

"Perfectly sure," says George.

"And they're not concerned about wading into a massive mess of leadership, these buyers of yours?"

George shrugs. Frankly, the current turmoil has nothing on what he suspects would ensue if the identities of those responsible for Sackett's murder are ever brought to light. It's probably worse than irresponsible of him to proceed with this sale when he has reason to suspect not only ethically-suspect but downright criminal activity. But that's hardly his problem.

"I honestly couldn't care any less."

Henry laughs, without humor.

"You surprise me, George. A year ago you would never have cut and run like this."

The inherent insult doesn't even pretend at subtlety, but George lets it slide.

"Let's just say my priorities have shifted. As yours have."

"Fair point."

In Laurens's absence the chairmanship falls to Jay, who George can work with. The vice-chairmanship goes to Mifflin, who he can't. The magnitude and finality of his situation only really hits him then, when he's sitting across a conference table from a row of men who have been attempting to force him from his job for months, and don't even realize how close they are to getting their wish.

He plasters the veneer of a conciliatory smile on his face, and is silent. He can endure this for a little longer.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Motherfucker!"

The paring knife in Ben's hand clatters to the counter as Ben sucks his bleeding index finger into his mouth. He glares daggers at the tomato on his cutting board as though it were actually responsible for his injury, then pushes knife, board, and vegetable forcefully away from him, turning to the kitchen drawer where he keeps his takeout menus. Anna was just going to have to be content with something from the Cuban place around the corner, as a home-cooked meal didn't seem like it was meant to be. It's not exactly the impression of cool, calm, grownup togetherness that he had hoped to project when she came over, but at least his kitchen will be clean.

He sweeps the used utensils into the sink, grabs a bandaid for his finger, and shrugs into a jacket to make the trip outside.

All around him are the signs of a slow spring stirring under the sooty slush of a New Haven winter. It used to be, when he was a student, that he lived for these weeks of gentle rebirth. He'd take his studying out of the stuffy, vaulted halls of the library even if it meant sitting on a cold concrete bench beside the Green, or settling himself on the wet earth under a tree in the first flush of flowering and refusing to move until the seat of his jeans was soaked through and focusing on his reading became impossible. He'd relished any excuse to get out, out of the classroom, out of his dorm, anywhere.

Now, however, that prospect holds very little appeal. It's not as though the last month has turned him into some kind of a shut-in. Far from it. He would be ashamed to be so affected by something so inconsequential as a breakup, as though he were a teenage girl in a sentimental movie rather than a grown man with a job and a life that could not simply grind to a halt in the wake of such a relatively minor inconvenience.

Frankly, since it happened, he's been able to get more work done, be more focused. It was remarkable how much more he was able to do over the weekends in particular, when he didn't have to spend so much of his time on the train going back and forth from the city.

But there had been a few, or quite a few, days where he had been perfectly content to use the terrible weather and a happy lack of demands on his time as a convenient excuse to stay in and do nothing. Maybe he sleeps a bit more now, spends a few more mornings lingering in bed, watching the quality of the light on his whitewashed walls shift with the advancing day. But that's all.

He makes it to the Cuban place, puts in his order with the kindly old lady in the front and then settling into seat by the window to people-watch as he waits for his food. It's better than sitting back at his place, or it ought to be, but for all his good intentions, his attention wanders quickly from the homogenous mass of milling coeds streaming past the window.

He's sitting on the edge of Nate's couch, his hands twisted in his lap, George's check practically burning a hole through the leather of his bag.

He can't even think about the fact that it's there. Mocking him. He ought to have just thrown the thing away, but for all that it inflames his pride, he knows what a horrible waste that would be. The whole fiasco, for all the trouble it's caused him, ought to be good for something. But the thought of

cashing that check himself, of looking one more time at the sum it specifies, at the signature scrawled across the bottom, is perfectly intolerable. That's why he's here.

The gist of the story comes out of Ben in a rush. He's not even entirely sure how, doesn't remember the exact words he uses. But a few minutes later, Nate sits across the coffee table from Ben with the envelope in his hand, and a look of undiluted relief on his face.

"Oh thank God," Nate sighs, and Ben chooses to believe that he's talking about the fantastic Providence that's brought them the money, just as they needed it. Even as he knows better.

"So we should be all set," Ben says. "You can cash it whenever, and we can pay the tournament registration and book flights whenever we want. Sullivan just wanted to make sure we kept the thing off the books."

Nate's face scrunches in the same way it always has since they were at school together, in a look of perfectly innocent bewilderment.

"You mean they just want us to buy it ourselves, with this?"

"That's the plan."

"And you don't want to cash it yourself? I mean, it's fine, it just seems kind of..." Nate shrugs, by way of finishing his sentence. Ben flinches.

"I really, really can't do that," he says, just as Nate seems to realize his mistake.

"Oh, fuck, I'm sorry Ben, I didn't think--"

"It's fine," says Ben, with conviction. "It's okay."

He'd even let Nate set him up with a few of his seemingly-boundless circle of friends. The first was a librarian from the Beinecke, who arrived at the bar dressed to the nines and sporting the expression of someone constantly engaged in the ruthless calculus required to measure the entirety of the world around them against their own personal standards of taste. Ben could hardly stand to sit down with him long enough to hastily throw back a couple of drinks, feeling the whole time as though he were constantly being weighed on the scale of his exacting and comprehensive opinions: his clothes, his face, his voice, his politics, all set against some inscrutable standard.

It had taken a bit of convincing for Nate to get him to agree to a second set-up, but the next guy, an insurance salesman out of Hartford, had come much nearer the mark. They'd met halfway in Waterbury for a movie and a late drink, and Ben found himself laughing more than he had thought he might, more at ease than he thought he would be. They'd gone out a few more times, nothing serious, never talking religion or politics or even family, but Ben welcomed the distraction, welcomed the excuse to let his mind linger on trivial things.

Ben had actually liked the guy a lot: mild-mannered, a little stolid, but kind. Easy to talk to. Easy to be around. Not to mention the fact that he was undeniably attractive, and after a handful of beers each on their third date, not at all shy about how much he wanted Ben to fuck him.

Ben even seriously considered it. It would be nice for a change, he thought, not to drift off to the thought of George's hands resting possessively on the small of his back, George's smile, felt rather than seen, pressed against the skin of Ben's neck before his tongue found Ben's pulse point. Memory and thought and fantasy all ricocheted back and forth against the walls of Ben's brain, as though his skull were an echo chamber, and while Ben could accept this state of things as the natural consequence of the choices he had made, it was still highly...inconvenient.

But all it had taken was a few passionless kisses in the front seat of Insurance Salesman's sensible Volvo before the whole thing had fizzled out.

So he'd a pin in the dating thing for the time being. He could always try his hand at it later. Nate always had more people he could set Ben up with, or so he said. But the more time he let pass, the more his anger at George had cooled. Work had slowed down, his day-to-day distractions had begun to subside, and the less he could ignore the facts of the matter.

He'd made a mistake. He might not have been the first or the only one to do so, might not have been any more guilty than George of letting their relationship fall apart, but this wasn't some kind of accounting exercise. It wasn't as though he could tally up all their respective shortcomings and missteps in a balance sheet and determine who had come out the better or worse. He'd done this. Him. And he hadn't fixed it, and now it was too late.

Ben sighs and rounds the corner of Elm, almost slipping in a puddle and only just managing to right himself after windmilling his arms around, biting back another curse and pointedly ignoring the pack of co-eds who can't seem to decide whether or ask if he's okay or laugh at him. He's able to evade their scrutiny by ducking into the door of the restaurant, where he's not required to do anything other than place his usual order and settle himself in a chair by the window to wait.

He kicks his heels as he sits, listening to the rolling, percussive chatter of the waitresses, his mind somewhat soothed by the incomprehensible but familiar sounds. For a moment, he's tempted to come up with some excuse to call Anna up and cancel, sure as he is that he has more than a few reasons to dread their ensuing conversation, and not too keen to hash over the circumstances and events that he's been turning over and over in his own mind for weeks. But he's already put off her visit for entirely too long, any longer and her reaction to his current circumstances was far less likely to be sympathetic.

In the end, though, he needn't have worried.

Anna doesn't probe him with uncomfortable questions about his own love life the moment she arrives, as he'd feared she would, but, distracted, sits herself primly down at the edge of his couch, and says the very last thing he'd ever expected to hear from her.

"I'm asking Selah for a divorce."

Ben stares at her, a list of things to say cascading through his mind, none of them in any way appropriate.

But you two were so happy!

I don't understand, how could this have happened?

What did he do this time?

I always knew he wasn't good enough for you.

Etc etc.

Wisely, he says none of those things.

"I'm so sorry, Annie."

She gives him a watery smile.

"I should have figured it would happen. We were never -- I don't know -- I look at the way my parents are, the way *your* parents are, and I guess we were never like that. We were never soulmates. I just thought what we were was...enough."

Ben feels the heavy beginnings of self loathing beginning to churn in his gut. He hadn't had any idea that Anna and her husband were having trouble. She'd never made mention of it, and he'd just never thought to ask. Between the four of them, him, Nate, and Caleb, Anna had always seemed to be the best at having things together.

"If there's anything I can do," he says earnestly, and Anna's expression shifts. She looks away, her lips pressed into a thin, agitated line. She'd obviously anticipated the question, was obviously tempted to take him up on his offer, but anyone who knew Anna half as well as he did would be able to anticipate what a barrier her pride could be to accepting such an offer.

Patently, he waits for her to come to her own resolution, keenly aware of the possibility of having a chance to be *useful*, to be distracted by a problem and a puzzle not his own.

"There may be something," she says, tentative, after a few tense moments. "We've agreed to try and handle things without getting any lawyers involved. But Selah's investments are all over the place and I'm not really in a good headspace for poring through all that right now, and you've always been, I don't know, *competent* with this sort of thing, and--"

"Of course," Ben cuts in. "I'd be happy to. Just bring me anything you'd like me to look at."

Anna brings the paperwork by later that week. It's, admittedly, much more than he'd expected: boxes of records and investment returns, prospectuses, random business plans scratched out on the backs of barroom napkins that Ben decides he's just going to go ahead and leave for later. As much as he admires their determination to undergo such a painful process as amicably as they can, he can't help but wonder if they might have been wiser to forgo a lawyer and hire an accountant instead. But no matter. He'd offered to help.

It paints a pretty coherent picture, all told. Selah's family had always had money, but he'd always been too contrary and ambitious just to play it safe with what he had, throwing money at all kinds of companies and all kinds of crazy schemes.

Ben's gets to work, and feels like he's just beginning to get a handle on things when he comes across a name that tugs gently at his memory.

Hanover International

He stares at the letterhead for a long time, trying to recall why it should be so familiar. When he finally does remember, he has to take a step back.

Hanover International. Continental's trans-Atlantic rival and principal competitor.

Ben shouldn't be curious. He'd long respected George's expressed wish that Ben not ask too many questions about his work, his wish to be allowed to keep that part of his life separate from the place Ben inhabited (never mind the fact that he'd always been full of questions about Ben's own job.) But he has no reason to respect George's privacy now. So he goes digging.

Soon he's almost entirely off track from his work on Anna's behalf, Selah's tangled but ultimately uninteresting financial dealings all but forgotten. He casts a wide net in his search, not even certain of what it is he's searching for, and instead he's just bombarded by the quiet, pervasive evidence filtered through news sources and investor's prospectuses and shareholders' reports of the

impending collapse of Continental's impressive corporate superstructure.

This was an organization that could hear the footsteps coming up behind them. Ben himself could hear the drumbeats. The clues were myriad: layoffs, failed ventures, and dwindling investments for a start -- all happening, Ben could not help but notice, as Mt. Vernon exhibited the sure signs of unremarkable but steady growth. There were other patterns that diverged as well, especially the gradual shedding of Continental's R&D expenses, even as Mt. Vernon shifted more and more of its resources in that direction. If it wasn't for the formal association between them, Ben would have had a hard time believing that these weren't in fact two entirely separate companies.

In time he stumbles upon the same project that George had once mentioned to him -- almost in passing -- so many months previous, tucked in amongst a list of tangentially-related agrobiological ventures. He finds the provisional patent application Hanover had filed, the preliminary data published in assorted mid-tier scientific journals.

He doesn't begin to try to understand the cascade of incomprehensible jargon and even less-comprehensible graphs that populate the papers, but he is able to take note of the list of authors that grace each article. Nathaniel Sackett's name leaps off the screen at him over and over again, and Ben grows steadily pensive as he pores over what amounts to a lifetime of work in the field: a dense, thorny legacy of hypotheses and proofs that for all Ben knows, amount to nothing of real scientific significance.

But he feels, from an inexplicable sense of loyalty to this dead man he'd never met, the compulsion to continue slogging through the morass, skating over the text of each paper in turn. And as he reads, a new pattern tugs at him, one that makes him instinctually go back over the ever-shifting list of authors at the top of each piece: sometimes no more than three or four to a paper, sometimes as many as thirty. But there is, he soon realizes, another name almost always in conjunction with Sackett's own. It goes back years, follows him across multiple institutions and niche fields.

And Ben has no reason to be suspicious, no reason to fall any further down this rabbit hole than he's already gone. But something in his gut commands him to grasp at this new name, this new lead. So he does.

And when Ben finally steps back from his computer hours later, bleary-eyed and exhausted, he knows what he's found, and what it means. And he knows with perfect clarity he cannot keep this to himself.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the long wait on this one y'all. Med school has been kicking my ass. But the last few chapters are already in the works and should come with a bit more regularity.

Chapter 21

Ben had offered up the meeting place -- Grant's memorial -- without thinking about it. And only after he'd sent the message had he recognized his error.

He's not sure he can ever think of Grant's tomb without thinking about the crisp autumn mornings they'd spent there. It had been one of their favorite spots, a frequent destination on long cool-weather walks from George's apartment, and Ben had many memories of sitting on the steps of the memorial, the two of them discussing the news or maybe the book Ben had been reading on the train, or just silently watching the ebb and flow of people around them. Sometimes George looked on as Ben got his ass kicked at chess by the old retirees who hung around, afterward always slyly offering ways to soothe his wounded ego.

When Ben steps out of the cab, he almost hopes that George won't show. He could even endure the frustration and disappointment of having wasted the morning to get here if it meant he might not have to go through with this meeting. But he should know better than to hope that George might be late, much less go back on his word and not come at all.

And, indeed, George is already waiting for him, seated with evident unease on one of the Gaudiesque mosaic-encrusted benches at the edge of the plaza, his hands clasped in front of him, staring off into the middle distance. In his old jeans and dark jacket he looks altogether incongruous against the riotous color of the tiles, and it almost stops Ben in his tracks to see him look at once so similar and different from his old self.

But he hadn't come all the way up here for that. He shifts the strap of his bag up his shoulder, steels himself and recalls again the words that he'd prepared to navigate this moment. Without letting himself get in his own way, he goes and sits down beside him.

George's response to being interrupted at his reverie might not be apparent to any passersby, but Ben doesn't miss what is, to him at least, a very evident flinch.

Ben wastes no time before going to his bag, pulling out a slim manila folder and placing it in his lap.

"I obviously don't have all the facts," Ben begins, breezing right past any inevitably clumsy attempts they might make at greeting each other. "But I figured I could lay out what I do have. I don't want to take up too much of your time," he concludes, staring at George's shoulder, unable to look him in the eye.

George opens his mouth to respond, then closes it again.

Before the silence can lengthen into something even more awkward, Ben presses on.

"Like I said on the phone, I don't want this to be anything dramatic. I'm just here to tell you what I found out. Because I thought that you deserved to know."

"I appreciate it," he says carefully. "But I think --- if you could explain---"

"Richard Worthington," Ben says abruptly, feeling the pressure to get to the point. "He's the one who leaked your data."

George raises an eyebrow, looks askance at him.

"I looked into Worthington. It was a dead end."

"Yeah, it would have looked that way."

"He and Sackett had both invested years of work in that project," George continues. "They were partners going back to the beginning of their careers."

"All the way back to graduate school, actually," says Ben. "They did their post-doctorates in adjacent labs. Worked together, trained students together, published together, I know. But he did it."

"How can you be sure?"

Ben takes a deep breath. He'd prepared for this question, thought the whole thing through.

"Worthington's an MD, right? Decided he wanted nothing to do with patients, and ended up hiding out in lab after lab. But physicians are required by law to report all income originating from corporations who might represent a potential conflict of interest. There's a database, available to the public, everything above board. Nothing in his contract would have prevented him from doing that kind of research and there's no reason why you would think to investigate payments that had been fully disclosed. But that was the point. The money he got from Hanover would be hiding in plain sight. He paid taxes on it and everything."

"You're saying he got paid by Hanover for releasing Sackett's data?"

"Yes."

"You understand that he could have published that work in a top journal?"

"I do."

"And?"

"And a cool million dollars might have soothed the pain of not getting his name into *Nature*."

"A million dollars?"

"More or less. In varying installments, paid through a handful of puppet corporations, some of whom changed hands within *hours* of their first recorded payments to Worthington's bank account. It's all in the folder."

George sighs.

"This all makes sense. But this doesn't explain what happened to Sackett. That's not enough reason to kill him."

"You're right, it's not. Not if he thought that stealing that profitable technology was all that Hanover was trying to do. But he knew better," Ben says, voice low.

"What do you mean?" George says, leaning forward in his seat. His shoulders twitch, like he wants to move his hands from where they grip his knees, like he wants to reach for Ben. But he doesn't. Ben takes a deep breath.

"I think Hanover is colluding with some of your employees, and I think Sackett found out about it."

"Colluding how?"

"About a half dozen different ways. They're putting bids on divisions that are being auctioned off by your corporate office almost before they make the decision to put them up for sale in the first place. They know which projects you're looking to invest in, which potential clients you're planning to approach. They've been getting there first, and consistently."

"That doesn't necessarily mean--"

"Look at this," Ben says, pulling a photograph from the folder. "Charles Lee, and Hanover executive board member George Clinton, taken outside of the home of a well-known London model in 2013 by a British magazine,"

"How did you--"

"The paparazzo didn't recognize him, so his name didn't make it into the paper. But that's him. And he's either friendly with Clinton or being blackmailed for patronizing English prostitutes on their anonymous dime, but the relationship is real. And it's not just Lee. His right-hand, Bradford? He's got suspicious connections as well."

"And that's all detailed here?"

"Yes."

George looks away, frowning. Ben gathers the wherewithal to say the last thing he needs to say.

"There's more. It's not -- that is, I want to make it clear that I didn't go *looking* for this. It just, it came up. One last name."

"Who?"

Ben pauses, takes a great gulp of air.

"I might be wrong," he prefaces. "I hope I'm wrong. But I think -- that is, I have good reason to believe, that--"

"For god's sakes Ben, tell me who--"

"It's Arnold," he says in a rush, his voice rough. "Arnold is involved. I'm not precisely sure how. But while I was looking into Clinton, his point man, a guy named John Andre, he kept popping up, particularly after Arnold began having his -- well -- his financial difficulties. After Benedict and Margaret started... started seeing each other," he finishes, his cheeks coloring.

"I don't understand," says George. "What's their connection?"

"Andre and Margaret? They were...involved. I'd say pretty seriously involved, given the evidence. They'd more or less fallen out of contact until about the fall of 2013, when a lot of these problems began. And all of a sudden they were on speaking terms again."

George turns a puzzled look on Ben, eyes narrowed, dubious.

"How on earth could you possibly know all that?"

"Facebook," Ben deadpans. George lets out a bark of harsh, humorless laughter.

"I don't know if any of this is adding up," Ben says hurriedly, "or if I'm just totally off-base, but--"

"It adds up," says George. "More than you know."

The silence lengthens, George lets out a powerful sigh, staring intently down at the folder in Ben's hand, and Ben's just beginning to contemplate walking away when George speaks.

"I don't want you to think that I mean anything more than this," George says, "but I hope you will allow me to apologize for what I -- for the way I conducted yourself when we were still..." He trails off, takes a deep breath. His words have the undeniable air of something rehearsed, something carefully if not *calculated* per se, but deeply and thoroughly considered.

"My actions were, as you said, patronizing and short-sighted, and disrespectful. And I don't say this to -- that is, I understand things between us have run their course. I just wanted to apologize."

He doesn't look better for having said it, Ben thinks. The angle of his shoulders is all wrong. He holds his hands in his lap, keeps very, very still.

Ben contemplates his options, staring down at his own scuffed shoes. He can accept the apology, the sincerity of which Ben can't doubt. He can be civil, and understanding, and they can part amicably, if not as friends then at least as indifferent acquaintances.

Or Ben can make a different choice. He can accept how little he has to lose, and take a risk.

"I know you meant well," he says, choosing his words with great care. "It was a good thing you did. The kids all had a great time at the debate. And I honestly don't see how else we would have made it happen, without your help"

George shifts in his seat, doesn't look up.

"I'm glad that...everything worked out in the end," George says, sounding undeniably wistful. Ben chances a glance at his face: he does look different, now that he thinks about it, from how he's been preserved in Ben's memory. He looks somehow less vital. More weatherbeaten. But what the sight stirs up in Ben is unexpected: not pity, not regret or remorse or disgust. A wave of pure longing rises up and threatens to overwhelm him, and it's only by a great force of will that he resists the impulse to reach up and smooth the lines from George's forehead. Instead, he practically leaps to his feet.

"Come take a walk with me," he says to George.

George stands, but not before glancing at Ben with a raw, aching look that Ben might only be imagining, so quickly is it replaced with a well-schooled expression of bland agreeability.

Ben walks them over to stand in the lee of the monument, not out of sight of all passersby but Ben knows this way they're far less likely to be overheard. But to his surprise, it's George who speaks first.

"Tell me why you're really doing this," he says, an edge of desperation sharpening his tone. "Why did you come here? Really?"

It's a question Ben has avoided asking himself in earnest. 'Duty' is how he ought to answer, he knows. Because it was the right thing. Because he felt an obligation. But for all that those are good, upright and honorable answers to the question, they're not the truth.

"Because you're a good man who wants to do good work, and I believe you should be allowed to do it, and I wanted to help. Because I was curious. Because...I thought it might help me understand what was so important that you felt you had to hide from me. "

He wants it to be true. Ben doesn't want to be here because he's sorry about what happened (though

he is) or because he's missed George terribly (though he has) but because this is right. It's right.

George looks at him, weighs his response in the scales of his nearly impeccable judgement. Then it seems he decides to take a risk of his own.

"I waited for your call," he says, very softly. "I thought about it so many times. I thought you just needed time. But then weeks had passed, and I started to wonder if you hadn't just come to your senses, and realized you were better off."

"I wasn't better off," Ben says. "Of course I wasn't."

And of course, *of course* Ben thinks, they would have fallen into their old trap. *I thought you realized you were better off*. Had Ben not thought those exact words to himself, *certain* that this was the exact conclusion George had come to for himself? That he'd finally realized Ben wasn't worth the trouble, wasn't grateful enough or agreeable enough or sophisticated enough to bother with?

"I wasn't better off," Ben says again, more quietly.

"Okay," says George, the message sinking in. He readies himself for one last leap. "And now? Do you think you're better off now? Than you were?"

Ben's tongue darts out to wet his lips.

"No."

George exhales, shifts his stance. He glances around, anxious to not be overheard.

"I understand that a lot of things would have to change," he says, almost whispering. "I understand that there would be a lot that we'd have to work through, that I would have to -- but if you think we might--"

"Yes," Ben says.

"I want to try," George finishes, simply.

"I want to try too."

Their twin declarations hang in the air between them for a long moment. Ben's held in suspense, not sure what to do next: what to say, how to move, where to put his hands. But George suffers from no such indecision. He rifles around in his pockets for his keys and slides the one to his apartment from the chain before pressing it gracelessly into Ben's hand.

"I have to take care of some of this now," he says, motioning to the folder of evidence under his arm. "I know it's a lot for me to ask, but will you wait for me?"

Ben nods, feeling more than a little lightheaded.

"Let me see you to a cab," George insists.

He guides Ben by the elbow as they step from the plaza to the curb. He hails a taxi and helps Ben into it before preemptively pressing a handful of cash into the driver's hand. Ben knows he could take exception to this, insist that he can cover the cost of his own damn cab fare, and George would back off. But a thick blanket of familiar warmth settles over his awareness at the demonstration of being so thoughtfully taken care of. At least for now, he doesn't want to take

exception. He doesn't want to protest.

The cab moves south along Riverside Drive, and Ben watches the people going up and down the adjacent path: joggers and dog-walkers and mothers with kids, and he clutches the key in his hand like a lifeline.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the longer than usual wait, guys. I was gonna have this story done by the middle of November but then the election happened and the world fell apart. We're in the home stretch now. Hang in there.

Another Uninnocent, Elegant Fall - Chapter 22

By the time Ben arrives at George's building, the day has grown cloudy, and the apartment is quite dark. The shades on all the great wide windows are drawn down, and the air is perfectly still, not even the hum of the air conditioner or the refrigerator audible enough to break the silence. For a moment Ben just stands in the door, taking in the familiar sight of the place.

He can't detect a single discernible difference between the apartment as he sees it and what he remembers it to have been: the sparse, somewhat sad abode of a single man alone in a big city, simultaneously anxious to present a certain image of himself to the wider world, and unconcerned with all the precise vagaries of passing trends. It feels the same, and yet, Ben can't help but detect a certain...staleness, a certain sterility in the air he breathes, a vague suspicion that George hasn't been spending as much time in the apartment as perhaps he used to do.

The most logical reason for this, Ben knows, is that George has simply been travelling more than usual, or putting in too many hours at the office. But there's another possibility that enters into his mind, unbidden. Hadn't Ben himself gone on a handful of dates over the past few months? Why shouldn't George have done the same thing? Why shouldn't he have found

The thought hits him harder than it should.

Suddenly he wishes George hadn't sent him on alone, that he had allowed Ben to accompany him to the office, or wherever he had been headed after leaving Grant's memorial. Ben understands the urgency, understands George's reticence to let Ben fully into his confidence, his fear of putting Ben into unnecessary danger. But that doesn't mean it has to sit well with Ben, now that he's got to rattle around in George's apartment like a piece of loose change.

He considers pouring himself something from the liquor cabinet, but contents himself with a glass of water that he drinks in front of the window. He looks down at the bustling action of the street outside, and feels himself unusually agitated by the ceaseless motion of cars and pedestrians, caught up in the tangle of motivations and destinations and lives not his own. To escape, he wanders into George's bedroom, not sure what he's looking for, not sure how he's supposed to talk himself down from this edge of pointless nervous tension, how to purge this sudden and irrational sense of dread. He's sure he's going to find a second toothbrush in the bathroom, catch a whiff of an unfamiliar perfume. He steels himself for it, resigns himself to the eventuality.

But there's nothing of the kind waiting for him. At least, nothing obvious. George's bedroom, like the rest of the apartment, is the same as it ever was. The only difference that Ben can perceive is the incongruously unmade bed, sheets tossed back over George's usual half of the mattress. It's not like him to leave the apartment without making it, to disregard that old, ingrained habit that Ben knows he's had since his days in the service.

Ben smooths his hand over the rumpled sheets, considers, debates, and ultimately succumbs to the urge to clamber onto the mattress, rest his head against George's pillows.

He picks up the book on George's nightstand (a Patton biography, because..of course it is) and thumbs through it, his mind entirely disengaged from the words on the page. But it's comforting to be able to hold something in his hand, even if only for a little while. He tries to settle himself down, not chasing sleep so much as a quiet mind, but being here, he's submerged at once into a host of impossibly-vivid sense memories that the prospect of real relaxation is just too remote. He rolls over onto his front, takes a deep breath, and is hit with the unmistakable scent of George's soap and cologne. If he closes his eyes, he can summon the picture-perfect memory of him, lying on his back in dignified repose, or maybe snoring softly, as he had a tendency to do. Or the last time he was here in this bed, when George, always the early riser between the two of them, had slipped below the sheets to give Ben a truly memorable wake-up call. The phantom sensation hits Ben so hard that he has to press the heel of his hand to his groin, and flip over onto his back, acutely aware of how close he is to getting himself off against the mattress.

He glances out the window, where the sun hasn't even begun to think about setting. He hopes George gets home soon.

Long hours later, George finally steps out of his office and into the corridor. He locks the door behind him with steady hands that belie the deep agitation that's been eating at him all day. He's done all he could do for the moment: correlated Ben's findings with some previously-collected data of his own, set up meetings with those few of his colleagues he could trust to help move forward, and engaged in a bit of misdirection. But he'd come to the end of the line.

Out on the sidewalk, ready to hail himself a cab, George hesitates. While frankly all he wants to do is go home and get some rest, he can only anticipate what will inevitably be a grueling conversation with Ben when he gets back.

With a sigh, he steps back from the curb, considers his options. He'd heard nothing from Ben all afternoon, has no confirmation that he even did as George had so thoughtlessly requested and no proof that Ben will in fact be waiting for him when he reaches his apartment. He's gotten ahead of himself, expected too much. He ought to know better than to set himself up for that kind of disappointment. But it wouldn't be the worst thing, perhaps. He'll come up with a suitable, appropriate way to thank Ben for his help, and they'll be able to go their separate ways with dignity and closure. There are far worse outcomes.

Newly resolved, George embarks upon the journey home. He does not work in the cab, as he usually does, but takes the time to observe the traces of fresh, clean spring scenery visible from the window. He centers his mind, allows himself to come down from the tumultuous day, and reconciles himself little-by-little to the impending disappointment of arriving home to an empty apartment. He even picks up his spare key on his way up, resigned to the likelihood that Ben won't be there.

But the door, when he reaches it, is unlocked.

It takes him a moment to process this. From where he stands, he can see no other evidence of Ben's presence. The lights are all off, neither the TV nor the stereo is on. For a split second he considers the (almost unbelievable) possibility that he never in fact locked the apartment door that morning on his way out, but then, across the room, Ben's dark silhouette rises from the armchair that faces the picture window.

George opens his mouth to greet him, to apologize for being so late, to say something, anything,

but before he can formulate the words, Ben crosses the room in a few long strides, takes George's chin in his hand, and brings their mouths together. Soon George finds himself being backed up against the apartment door, Ben's body pressed in a firm line against his, slim and strong and resonating with vitality, a humming live wire.

George pulls away with what he knows perfectly well is the last remaining reserve of his willpower.

"We should -- shouldn't we talk?" he asks, unable to conceal his genuine surprise at being greeted in this (not at all unwelcome) way.

"We will," Ben insists, earnest, his eyes fixed on George's mouth. "Later."

"I just want to make sure--"

"I'm not angry," Ben says, anticipating the rest of his sentence with uncanny ease. "I'm not."

"You were, as I recall," George shoots back wryly. "And with good reason."

"Yeah," says Ben, meeting his eyes at last. "But I'm not now."

The message is clear: Ben doesn't want to have this conversation any more than George does. And for all that George knows that they *must* have it, that postponing the inevitable event is not likely to do either of them any good in the long run, he's swiftly running out of good reasons not to let themselves indulge in this, at least for a little while.

And after all, it's not as though he really has the words to communicate all he has to say. So he lets himself have it, lets himself pour out his gratitude into the kiss that Ben rises up onto his toes to meet, lets simpler forms of expression replace stumbling sentences.

In lieu of grasping for the words to apologize, he lets Ben take control of the proceedings, lets him enjoy the novelty of having George be the one bracketed against the unforgiving surface of the wall, Ben's long hands splayed wide on either side of his shoulders. As pleasant as it all is, George can't help but feel it a little unlike Ben to be so worked up so fast, already a coil of barely-suppressed energy, when in the past he always took at least a minimal amount of coaxing before he could be encouraged to be quite so bold. But it takes him a few more moments to pick up on the most telling details, to notice just how pink Ben's cheeks are, how quick his pulse is. George hears a small metallic clatter, and glances down to realize that Ben's belt is already unbuckled, his fly only half-done. Suddenly he has to wonder what Ben was up to before he walked in, all alone in the dark.

"What were you doing all afternoon?" George asks, all innocence. "I hope you weren't bored."

Ben pulls away to answer, a pained expression fleeting across his face.

"I kept myself entertained," he says, his intonation betraying nothing, even as he refuses to meet George's eyes. The corner of George's mouth twitches upward, but he governs his expression.

"Did you now?" he asks, slipping a hand to Ben's open zipper.

"That's right," Ben says in a half-gasp that tells George all he had been hoping to hear.

Later, he'll make Ben tell him all about it, make him articulate without shame the fact that he'd spent hours skirting the edge, waiting for George to come home. He'll make Ben confess to having a hand in his jeans while he read through George's books, lounged in his bed, rinsed off in his

shower. He'll urge Ben to meet his eyes when he describes exactly what he had most hoped George would do to him when he returned, the cares and concerns of his day satisfactorily dealt with and the full force of his focus ready to be turned on Ben alone. Later he'll do all that, and more. But not tonight.

Tonight he doesn't feel like demanding much of anything from Ben, doesn't feel like dividing his energy between simple appreciation and any more elaborate schemes. And besides, if Ben wakes up in the morning, as he might very well do, and decides their reconciliation was nothing more than a mistake made in the heat of the moment, George doesn't want that to be the memory he leaves him with.

So that's how Ben finds himself steered into the bedroom, divested of his clothes, urged up onto the mattress, as George settles himself between Ben's spread legs. They'd fallen into this custom, once upon a time, in large part because it was easier on George's knees (which are in excellent shape for a man his age, though that is...beside the point) but George prefers it for other reasons. Though at first Ben sits up against the headboard, George knows that eventually Ben will sink down to lie supine against the mattress. He likes the way it encourages Ben to splay out against the pillows, to throw his head back with abandon. On the same plane, as they are, it feels like they occupy a position of perfect equality. He likes the view better too, likes to have the chance to spread Ben out, to run the flat of his palm over the smooth skin of Ben's inner thighs, to admire him frankly, and patiently.

All this he does, with the measured pace borne of long absence, savoring every sound Ben makes, acutely aware of the way he shifts against the sheets like he's ready to fly out of his skin. It helps, George thinks, that Ben's already halfway there, strung out and hypersensitive from his long afternoon of waiting. On any other night, under any other circumstance, George might have thought to make him wait for it a little longer, to test the limits of Ben's patience and his. But that's not in the cards, not tonight, not when all George wants to do is find every wordless way to communicate the simplest of messages.

Stay. Stay, and forgive me.

So he brings Ben off without teasing or delaying, guides him up and out of bed, into the shower, washes him off. He finds an old soft t-shirt and sweats for Ben to slip into, heartened by his apparent ready acquiescence to stay the night. But it's too early for bed, and at any rate his jangling nerves wouldn't let him even contemplate sleep for hours yet. And their talk won't wait forever.

"Come into the kitchen," he says, when Ben is dry and dressed. "Have a drink with me."

Ben frowns, looks down at his hands for a second or two, considers his options. But he's never been one to procrastinate any more than George has.

"Okay," Ben says. And together, side-by-side, they walk out of the dim bedroom.

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

3 months later

In the passenger pick-up line at JFK, Ben levers his suitcase into the trunk of a waiting cab. Sliding into the backseat, he rattles off George's address.

The backs of his hands are noticeably freckled, even in the dim light of the streetlamps. The cab driver is friendly, chatty: in altogether too good a mood, Ben thinks, for the late hour. They exchange a few words about the weather, the construction besetting the airport, and Ben's contributions to the conversation are tolerably polite, if unenthusiastic.

"Are you visiting?" asks the cab driver as they pull out onto the freeway, blessedly free of traffic, "or is this home for you?" Ben trips somewhat over his answer.

"Uh, I just got back. From vacation," he says, by way of a response.

"Oh yeah? Where to?" asks the cab driver.

"San Juan," Ben says, already reflexively cringing. Perhaps it was the legacy of having grown-up solidly lower middle class, but no matter how old he got he never quite managed to shake the shame of unnecessary travel to an exotic and luxurious location (though he'd undoubtedly taken more trips since he'd met George than in the entirety of his childhood, when a long weekend in Disneyland had seemed like the very height of outlandish sophistication.)

He fiddles resolutely with his phone for the duration of the drive, and that's sufficient to deter any further conversation.

George, absurdly, is actually out on the curb to meet him as he steps out, and stubbornly insists on carrying Ben's bag the whole way up to his apartment. He looks profoundly energized, at least to Ben's experienced eyes, despite the fact that it's nearly midnight and he'd probably much rather be in bed. He even offers to get Ben's dirty clothes in the laundry for him, sitting him down with a beer and positively insisting that Ben not help at all.

"How were your last few days?" he asks Ben from across the apartment.

"Not bad. Quiet," is all Ben says in response. "A little weird," he does not say. "Lonely," he *definitely* doesn't say. Though that would probably be the nearest distillation of the truth, as he can find words for it.

There had been some good memories, without a doubt, though mostly from the stretch of the trip where he had still had George's company. There had been the one morning when George had been woken with a start by a little brown gecko that had run right across the bridge of his nose (the story of which Ben was positively forbidden from sharing with any of their friends.) And there had been the long, lazy afternoons when they had lain about, overstuffed with mofongo those little guava pastries that Ben had discovered he liked so much, the heat making their limbs leaden, their eyelids heavy, and Ben had drifted off more than once to the sound of George reading the news from his

phone or one of the pulpy spy novels they'd picked up at the airport on the way.

But of course, George hadn't brought him out there just to enjoy the pleasures of a week away from the stifling late-summer heat of New York, even if he'd been perfectly willing to pretend that that was the case. No, there'd been a purpose to it. And Ben had known perfectly well what that purpose had been, why it had to be on that particular week, and no other. And he knew why George had been forced to apologetically excuse himself two days before they were due to fly back together, citing some emergency that called him back to New York.

Ben might have objected to being kept in the dark, if it hadn't been so perfectly obvious what was really going on. George had had been doing his best to be as open as possible about the apparent progress of the investigation that Ben had helped him to launch, but there had been plenty that Ben understood George simply couldn't tell him, or that his instincts, however hard George had tried to fight them, simply would not permit him to say. But it's no matter. Ben has his own ways of getting information, and lately had called on a journalist friend of his, who turned out to be an eminently useful source.

So when George woke Ben up with an apologetic kiss, and says he's terribly sorry but an urgent situation has called him home, Ben knows what it's for. He rolled out of bed to help George get the rest of his things into his suitcase, and was just ready to see him off when George had turned suddenly around, rested a hand on Ben's shoulder.

"I'll call you as soon as I'm home," he'd promised, "but it might be pretty late. Don't wait up for me. I love you."

"I love you too," Ben had said, the words still too new to sound entirely casual. "Fly safe." And he'd been gone.

Sure enough, the next day's papers, deep in the city section, had included the expected telephoto shots of a handful of men in fine suits being escorted one-by-one from Continental's Midtown offices, FBI windbreakers in the foreground. Ben hadn't searched the photo for Arnold's face, but he knew, somehow, that he was there.

It's justice he'd told himself, as he walked the cobbled streets of the old city, in search of some dinner and a little quiet. *He broke the law. That would still be true even if I hadn't been the one to prove it.* And that had been enough to ease, at least somewhat, his incongruous guilt, even if it hadn't fully settled his anxiety. If he stayed on the phone with George a little longer than normal, if he'd assented, without even pretending to put up a fuss, to George's uncharacteristic request that he be allowed to stay on the line until Ben fell asleep, then it was no one else's business.

So he'd got a few more days alone in Puerto Rico, to simmer and bounce around, and think. Suffice it to say, he wasn't feeling so depressed by the prospect of returning to normal life as he might have been at the tail-end of a normal vacation. And despite his reticence to admit as much to his cab driver, it really had felt like a homecoming.

Ben considers this, all of it, as he sits at George's kitchen counter, nursing the drink that had been poured for him, listening to the sound of the washing machine get up and running. When he gets up to put his glass in the sink, he happens past George's open laptop. He doesn't stare, as conscious of George's privacy as he knows George is of his own, but in his peripheral vision he sees something: a photo of a tidy, comfortable looking kitchen, that looks out over a tree-lined backyard.

It seems like an odd time for George to be considering a major renovation, but Ben figures he can ask about it later. And anyway, it's George's prerogative. It's his apartment, after all. He can do what he likes.

"Hey, can I take a shower?" he asks George as he returns to the kitchen. "I still smell like airplane." George just steps aside to clear the way to the bathroom.

Standing under the spray, Ben's already thinking with anticipated weariness of his trip back to New Haven the next day, where there's a pile of work and a depressingly-messy apartment waiting for him. It's the kind of Sunday to-do list that has every power to ruin a perfectly good Saturday night, but he takes the space of the long shower to fortify himself into not ruining George's evident good mood. He just rolls his shoulders back, sighs, and lets the near-scalding water hit his face.

A few minutes later Ben rifles through the chest of drawers, toweling his hair dry as he goes. He's left plenty of his clothes here over the course of the last few weeks, but not so much that he still can't make an excuse to pull out one of George's oldest t-shirts. The one he slips into, from the Fairfax County Annual 5K, actually has the date printed on it, and so George couldn't even feign ignorance when Ben laughed at him for hanging on to a t-shirt for more than 20 years. But there are others that have gone through the wash so many times that the silk screening had almost worn entirely away. George would never dare admit how old those are.

Ben resists the temptation to just climb into bed and let George find him there later, instead returning to the kitchen, where George is back on his computer. He sits himself down on the couch, leaning himself against the buttery leather, and tips his head back to watch George pick himself up from the kitchen table, close his laptop. Ben watches him stand, make for the living room, and he thinks.

The last few months had marked a startling renewal, signified by an openness in George that Ben might have found almost unsettling if he hadn't known its cause. But even underneath the smooth currents of their revived happiness, there remained a sense of uncertainty, one rooted in George's impending departure from Continental (which plan George had confessed to him right away.) His conscience, George insisted, would not allow him to depart without proper notice or while the corruption that Ben had helped him to uncover still ran rampant.

And it's not as though Ben doesn't believe him, but he has to suspect that there's a small part of George that craves retribution and vindication as much as actual victory for the rule of law and SEC regulations. That doesn't bother Ben hardly at all; there's no reason why it shouldn't be personal. And Ben might have been more concerned if George could somehow detach himself with inhuman coolness from the concerns of a company to which he had given almost ten years of his life.

He blinks sleepily up at the sight of George's profile, and he's struck by a strange observation, by the fact that George seems far more relaxed, far more like himself than has in weeks, now that Ben looks at him, really looks at him. When George settles himself in at Ben's side, pressing up flush against him, Ben can't help but ask the question that's been on his mind for days, even as it sounds as though it's coming from nowhere.

"Did you really have that much of a reason to worry?"

George sits back, purses his lips, looks Ben square in the eye. The answer he returns is uncharacteristically frank.

"You mean, did I have any reason to be worried enough to keep you out of the country? Is that what you want to know?"

"Well, technically..." Ben starts, unable to stop himself, but the pinched expression that comes over George's face is more than enough to keep him from elaborating on the intricacies of Puerto Rico's territorial status. Instead, a long pause extends in the space between them. Ben wouldn't have

predicted it, but it's George who breaks the silence first.

"I was sorry to have to leave you there alone. I wouldn't have done it, but--"

"I understand," Ben interjects. "Everything went smoothly though? At work?"

"Nobody put up a fight, if that's what you mean."

Ben draws in an anxious breath. No, it hadn't quite been what he meant, but it was close enough. And at any rate, George doesn't seem content to beat around the bush tonight.

"I swear to you, Ben, I wouldn't have done this without cause. These are men who are...used to getting their way. And even if I hadn't had reason to worry about what they themselves might do, their indictments open the door to prosecution of others who are far, far worse. The probability that they might have enacted reprisals against you wasn't trivial. You're a busy man, I wouldn't have inconvenienced you so badly if that weren't true."

Ben sits up straighter, looks George in the eye.

"It wasn't an inconvenience," he says, quietly.

"What would you have had me do instead?" George asks. "What should I have done differently?"

He says it with a kind of raw sincerity that tells Ben he's not being defensive or snappish, however much it would surely be true were such a sentence said by anyone else. He means it quite literally. He wants to know what to do differently.

Again, Ben has to wonder how many people have ever gotten the chance to see and know George in this light: so emotional, so unstudied. Ben still can't decide for himself if it constitutes a privilege, or a burden.

"You did the right thing," Ben says. "If I hadn't been clued in to your reasons, it might have been a problem. But I understood. I *do* understand."

"So would you mind telling me what's actually bothering you, if it's not that?"

Ben makes a little bitten-off sound of frustration, turns his head away. He can't articulate it. It's not just the prospect of the journey tomorrow, of the work immediately to hand and the long, grinding week to follow. It's that he suddenly feels the weight of all the journeys to come, all the distance, all the solitary weeknights that will see him confined to his cramped, cheerless apartment, all of it bearing down all together and all at once. It's never really struck him before, when he's had every reason to think that he was just the further indulgence of one of George's characteristic little cravings or habits, the latest iteration of a familiar pattern of behavior. And even when their situation had shifted, and George had recognized the need to convince him that that wasn't the case, that whatever they were to each other, George was by no means keeping one eye on some countdown clock and waiting for the best time to make a clean break, those self-same doubts had always lingered.

But Ben has taken a few steps back, and he's parsed George's actions and words these last few weeks, parsed the infrequent and significant gifts that George had presented him with, and all of it, upon deeper investigation, bespeaks a kind of steadiness. A certitude.

But as much as his own love for George has by now passed beyond all shadow of doubt, he's not sure that he wants to lock down the structure and substance of his life into...this. To be a part-time partner. A weekend commitment. It's not what he would have envisioned for himself, that's all.

"You were thinking of redoing the kitchen?" Ben asks, out of nowhere.

George blinks up at him, bemused.

"What? No."

"I say..." Ben says, hand waving listlessly towards the closed laptop. "Sorry, it was just out of the corner of my eye. I didn't mean to look."

"You saw that?"

"Yeah."

"Alright," says George quietly, the tips of his ears going a little pink for no reason that Ben can understand. "I was going to wait, but you might as well hear it now."

"Hear what now?"

"Well, you know that my...professional situation is going to be changing pretty significantly in the near future."

Ben nods, wanting to make a crack about how that's a pretty funny way to say "retirement," but he holds his tongue.

"Sure."

"And you know that I've never loved being in the city."

Ben can't hold back a laugh at that. It's true that he can imagine few places more at odds with George's nature and personality than Midtown at rush hour, but at the same time it's hard for him to really picture George rooted anywhere else. He'd become so enmeshed with Ben's own memories and impressions of the city that he can't quite contemplate one without the other.

"Yeah, I know."

"So I was thinking. Well. It's hard to figure out how to phrase this."

Ben settles in a little closer to George so their sides are pressed together. He leans in, encouraging.

"What's going on? You can just say it, don't worry about getting the words right." George takes a deep breath. It's to be a little speech then.

"What I mean to say, I'm about to have a lot more flexibility with where and how I spend my time. And you're rightfully very attached to your job and your students and, I would be happy to -- that is, I would be more than willing to come to you."

Ben purses his lips, tips his head to one side.

"I'd love to have you come up more, if you're willing. Sure."

"That's not what I'm saying," says George, who sits up a little straighter.

And Ben gets it.

"You want to move? To New Haven?"

When George meets his eye again it's with the steel-edge resolved that Ben has come to know very well.

"That's right."

"To *New Haven* ?" Ben can't help but repeat himself.

"Unless you have another suggestion."

"You'd do that?"

"Of course I would."

Ben pushes himself up from the couch, and gathers himself enough to stand.

"You're joking," he says, even as he knows that George would never joke about a thing like this. George doesn't even dignify the reflexive accusation with a response, just reaches for Ben's hand.

"Of course I would," he says again, more slowly.

Suddenly Ben can't get enough air in his lungs. George's face fills his vision, all earnestness and concern, affection and sobriety. No, he's not joking.

And now there's a new vision unfurling in Ben's mind, to replace the grim picture of that ceaseless cycle of train rides and lonely days. It's the kind of daydream that he's never allowed himself to indulge him, not ever, or at least not for long. But George doesn't have the ability to read Ben's mind, to interpret his silence for what it really is.

"This is all just hypothetical," he says hurriedly. "We don't have to discuss it now if--"

"Yes," says Ben, a little too loudly, recognizing his own mistake. "Yes, we do. We should. You would really do that for me?"

"Well, not just for you. I like to think I'd be getting something out of the deal too," George says, with the barest shadow of a smirk. "So, don't rush to make up your mind. But if you'd like to think about it."

But Ben doesn't need to think about it. The bone-deep exhaustion and unsettled mood that had held him in its grip had retreated, like a dense morning fog on a hot sunny day. He sits himself back down again, folds his legs up underneath himself and turns to face George squarely in the eye.

"I want you to live with me," he says, with confident finality.

George's smile breaks slowly, inexorably over his expression. He takes Ben's face in his hands, just looks at him for a little while.

"If you insist."

Chapter End Notes

The end :)

Thank you to everyone who stuck with me through this story. You've made it a lot of fun. Feel free to shoot me any questions or thoughts on tumblr. While this story is (finally!) done, I probably won't abandon this little universe if people are still interested in it. And I'm always happy to chat about anything at all.

End Notes

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